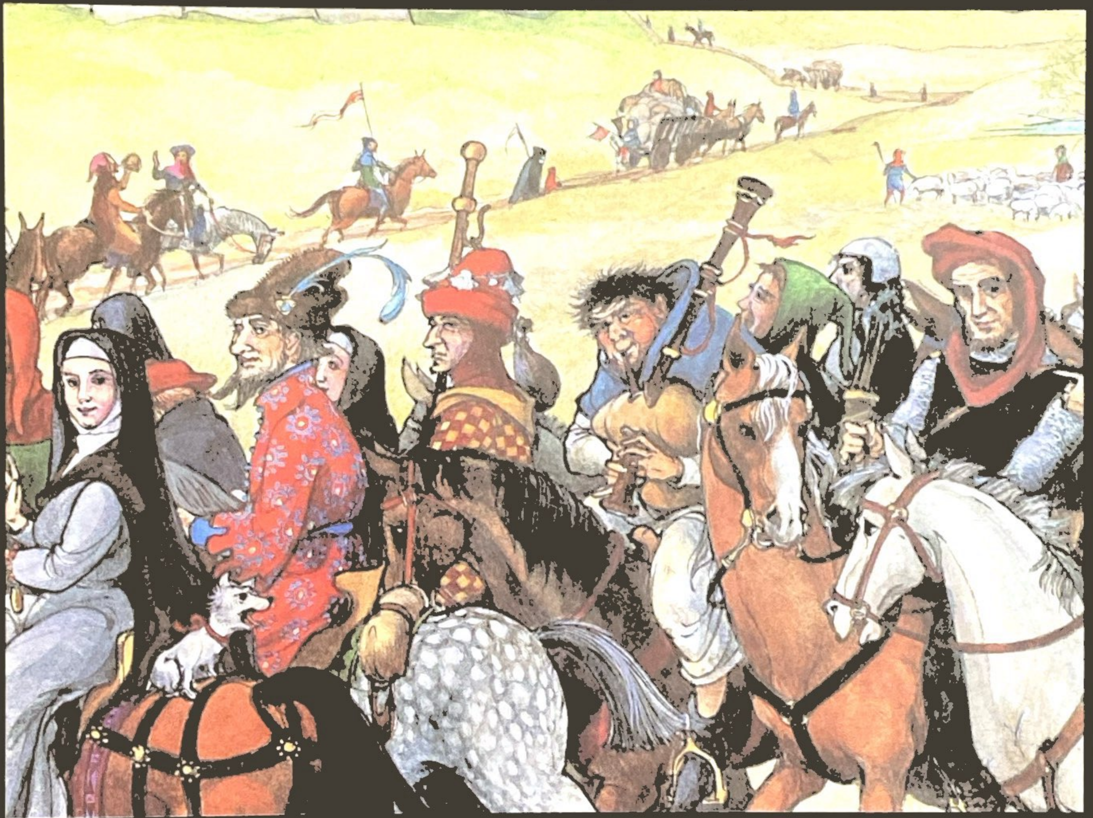
Geoffrey Chaucer

Canterbury Tales



Selected, translated, and adapted by

Barbara Cohen

Illustrated by

Trina Schart Hyman

On a sweet April day in the year 1386 a man named Geoffrey Chaucer mounted his horse and set out on a pilgrimage.

Thirty pilgrims were traveling from London to Canterbury, telling stories, and Geoffrey Chaucer wrote down what they said. Whether Chaucer actually went on such a pilgrimage or created the travelers and their stories as a work of fiction, *The Canterbury Tales* is one of the richest treasures of our literary heritage.

Here, masterfully adapted by Barbara Cohen and lavishly illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman, are four outstanding tales from this collection. The Nun's Priest recounts the boisterous barnyard adventures of a rooster and a hen. The venal Pardoner spins a cautionary tale of greed, murder, and punishment. The Wife of Bath illustrates her lusty discourse on marriage with the story of a knight who submits to his wife's will. Finally, the hospitable Franklin's story of an infatuated suitor and a faithful wife gently pokes fun at the excesses of courtly love.

Retold in lively prose that captures all the flavor and vigor of the original Middle English verse, these tales evoke the colorful world of fourteenth-century England and offer a perfect introduction to Chaucer's masterpiece.

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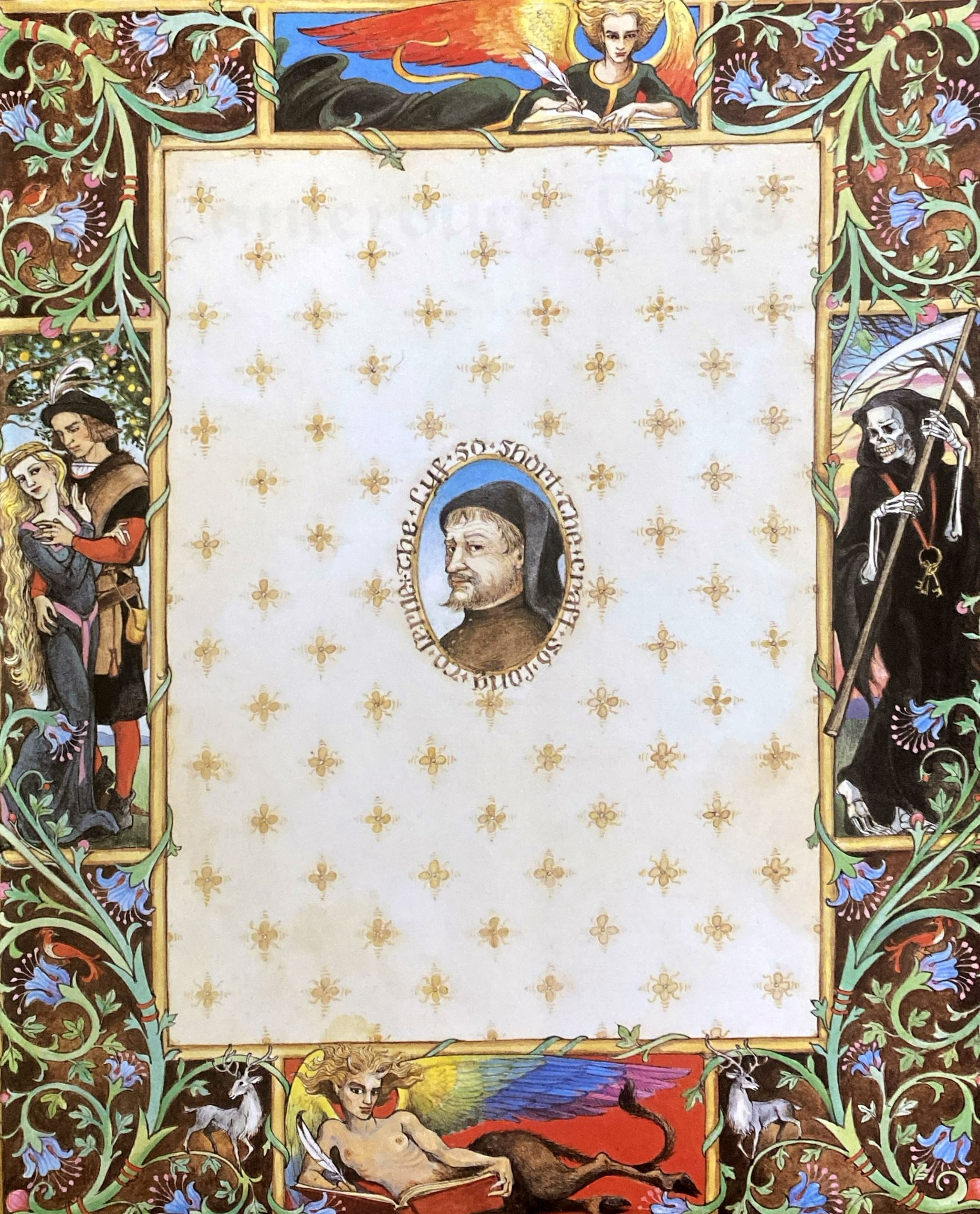
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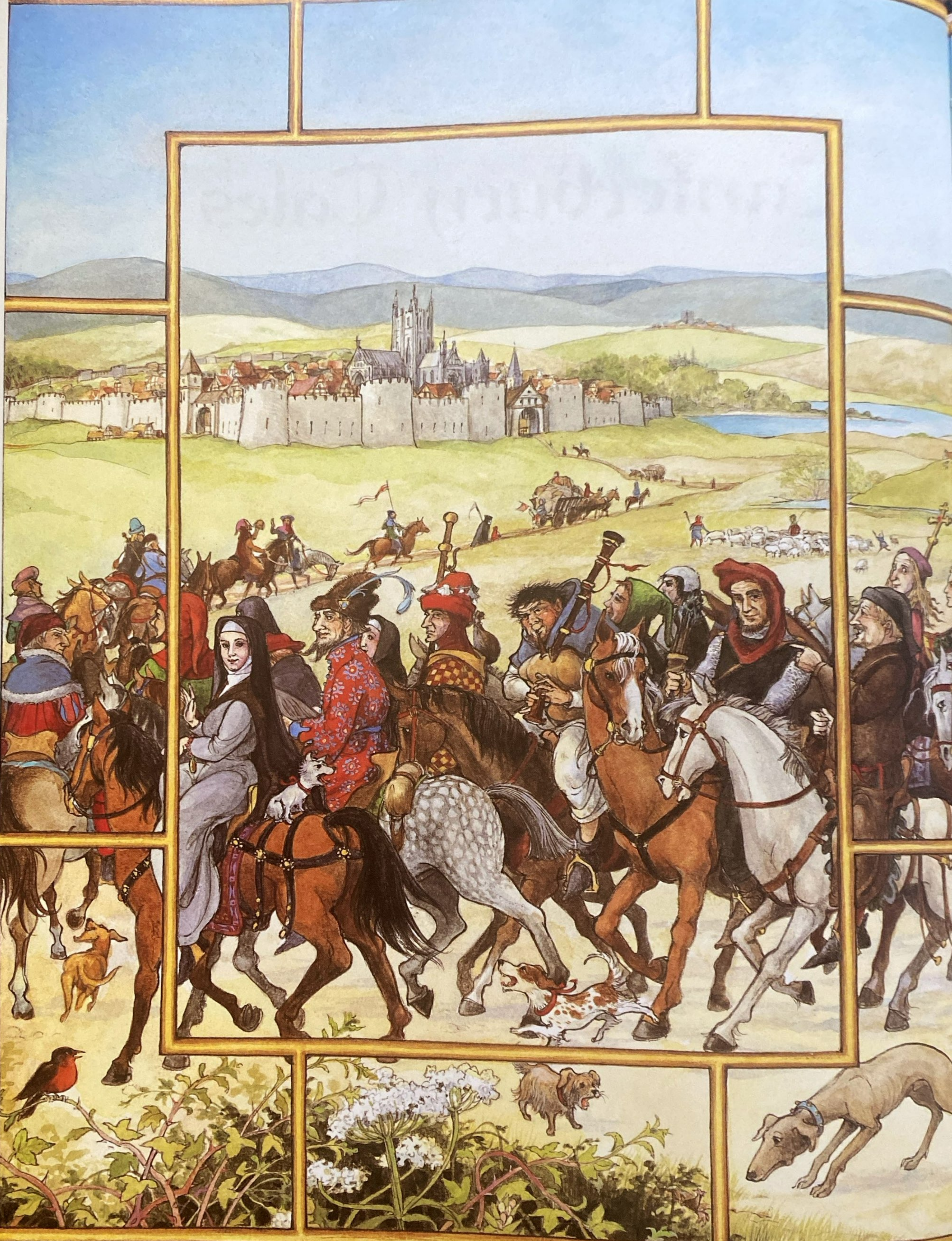

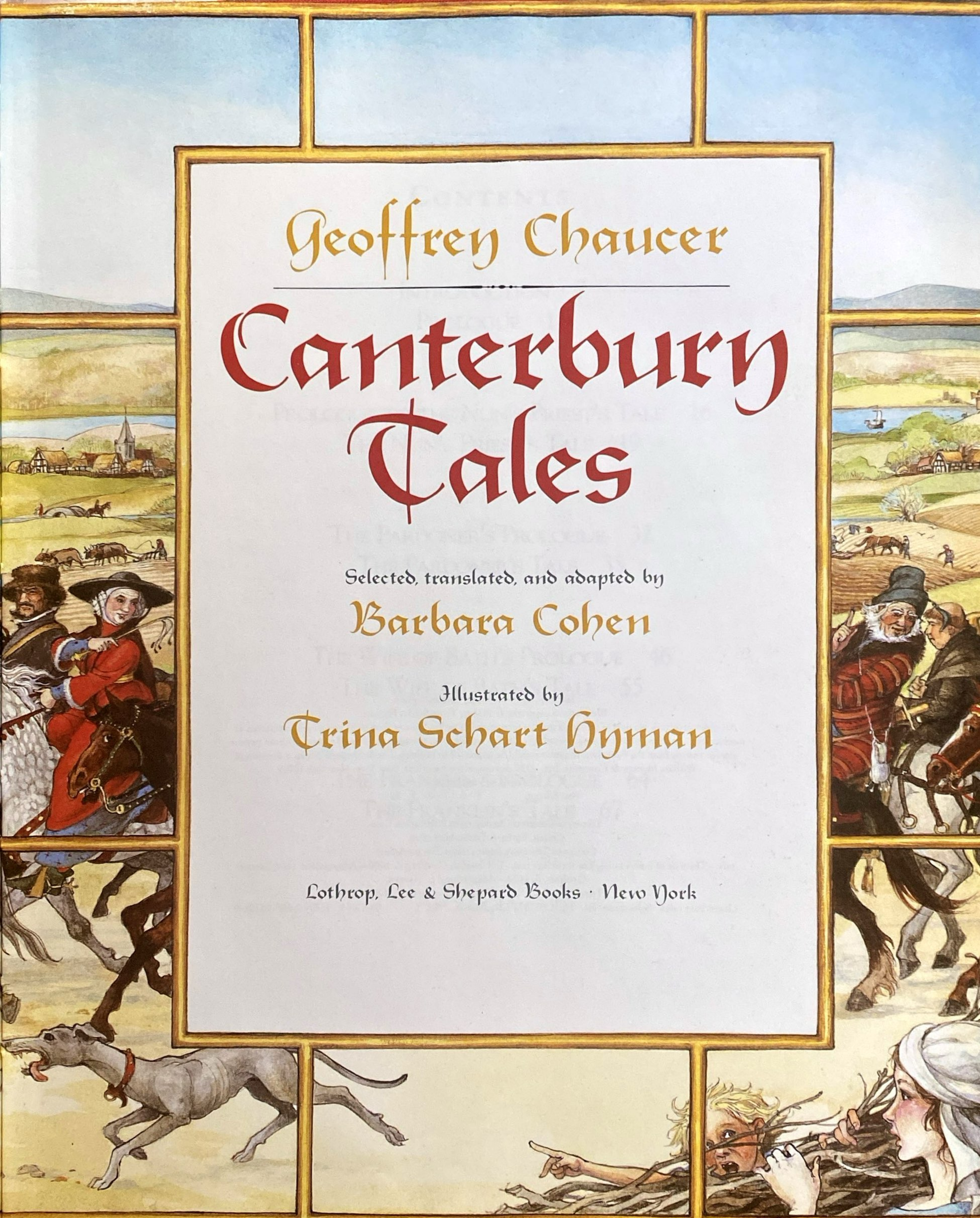

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INTRODUCTION

"HIS WORDS ARE BEST." BARBARA COHEN SAYS THIS IN THE Prologue you are about to read, and she follows many generations of fine writers in her love for Geoffrey Chaucer's poetry. There is scarcely an important figure in English literature who does not know and draw upon this wonderful poet. John Milton read him, Alexander Pope translated some of his work into the English of the eighteenth century, and William Blake designed illustrations for the *Canterbury Tales.* Shakespeare, maybe our greatest writer, borrowed one of Chaucer's plots for his play *Troilus and Cressida,* and Shakespeare's contemporary Edmund Spenser called Chaucer the "well of English undefiled."

Spenser was quite right, too; we owe to Chaucer not just a wealth of fascinating characters and stories, but also the very language in which our literature is written. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, French had held sway in the court, schools, and cultural life of England. When Chaucer was growing up, though, in the second half of the fourteenth century, English was once again becoming the language of the rich and powerful. But literature was still written mostly in French and in Latin. It was the example of Chaucer, and the power, subtlety, and humor of what he wrote in this "vulgar" language, that led later writers to use English.

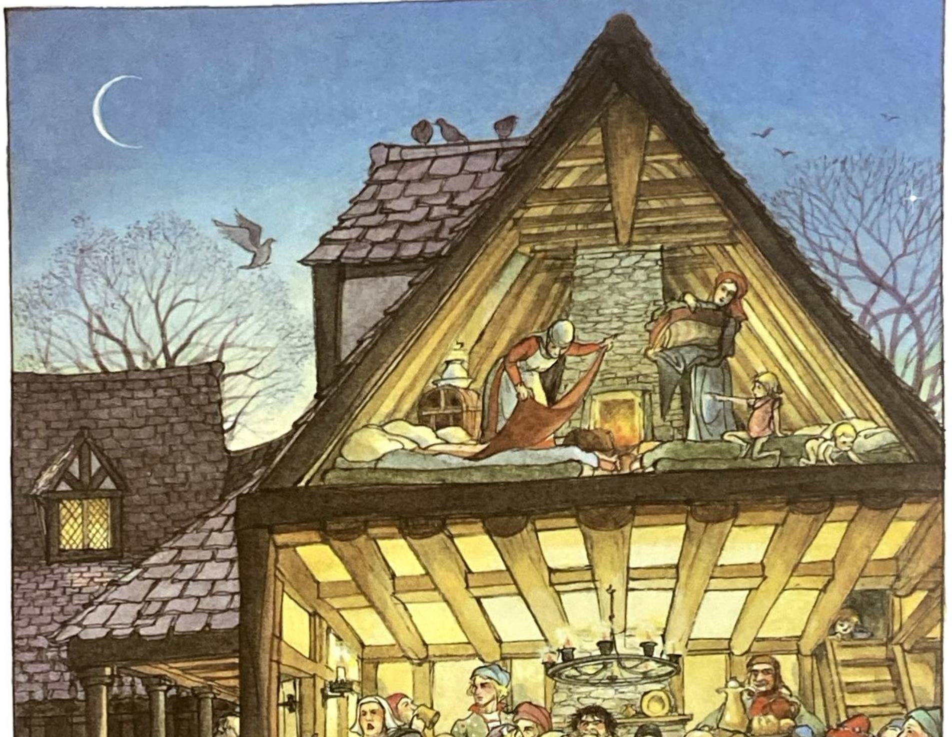
Even the sounds we most often associate with English poetry—the rhymed five-beat couplet—first became important with Chaucer's mature works. Much of his language is hard for us to follow today, but we can easily hear the rhymes and rhythms that are basic to our literature in lines like these, as Chaucer begins to describe the people he joined in his pilgrimage:

> At night was come into that hostelry
> Well nine and twenty in a company.

Chaucer, then, gave us the language and the rhythms of most of the poetry written in English. But he also gave us perhaps the richest, fullest portrait of a world and its people ever achieved by any writer. From the restraint and grandeur of his Knight to the flashy idiom and broad humor of his Wife of Bath, from the fairy-tale setting of the Franklin's Tale to the barnyard reality of the Nun's Priest's Tale, Chaucer's range of characterization and tone is unparalleled. And while he can be very funny, he is never merely funny, merely quaint. Chaucer's world, like our own, was full of problems and disorder. In his lifetime religion was in crisis, a king was toppled from the throne, and the working people rose in bloody revolt. Times seemed bad, and, then as now, people turned to works of the imagination for comfort, escape, and explanation. In the *Canterbury Tales,* Chaucer gave his readers a great work that provided them all these things and has gone on doing so ever since.

CHRISTOPHER BASWELL
Assistant Professor of English
Barnard College

Canterbury Tales



The Tabard

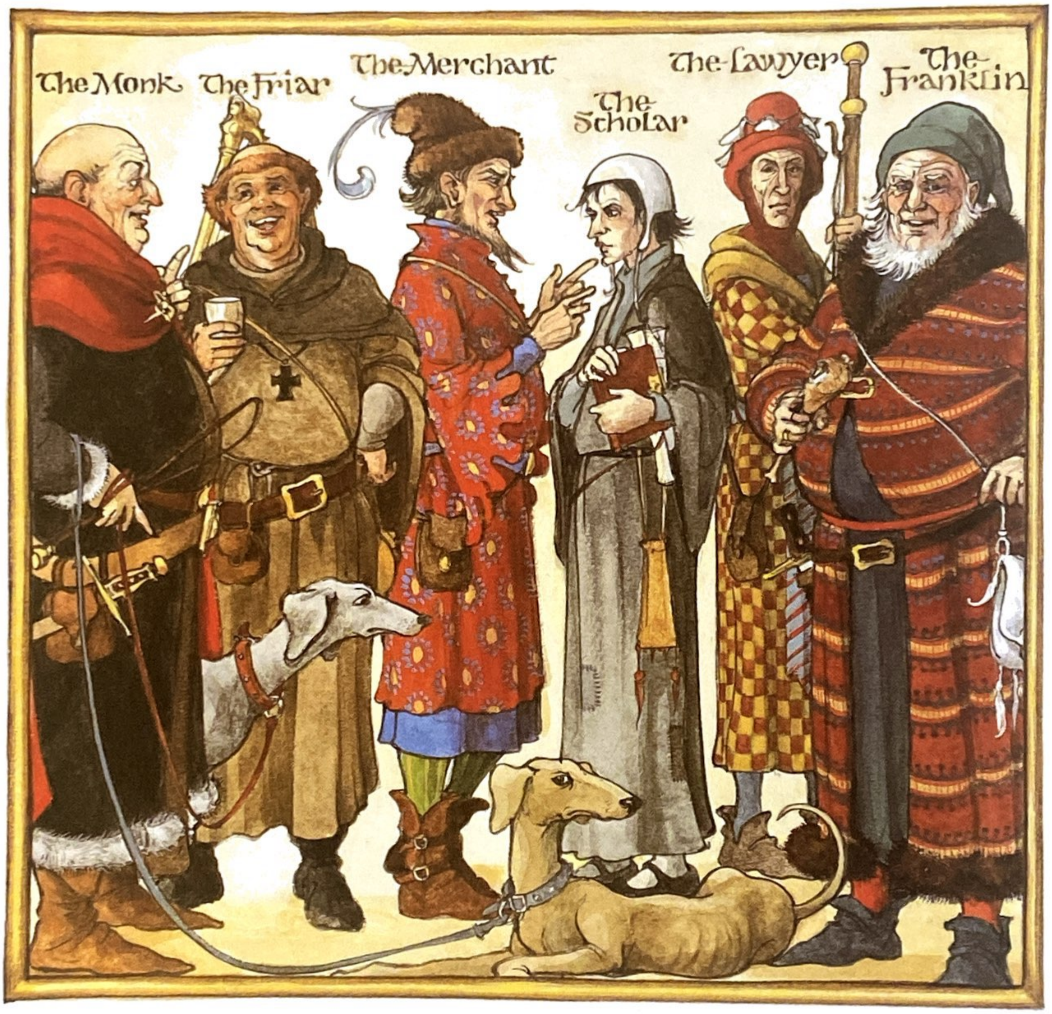
PROLOGUE

ONE SWEET APRIL DAY IN THE YEAR 1386 A MAN NAMED Geoffrey Chaucer mounted his horse and set out on a pilgrimage. It was spring, he was restless, he wanted to get out of the city, and so he had decided to take a trip to the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket at Canterbury Cathedral, about fifty miles southeast of his home in London.

Now this Master Geoffrey was a fairly important man. He'd been a soldier, a diplomat, and an administrator in the governments of King Edward III and King Richard II. But no one would remember his name today if he hadn't been something else too—a storyteller and a poet. His family didn't know, his friends didn't know, he himself didn't know that this ordinary April day was the most important day of his life. He was setting forth on a journey that would never end.

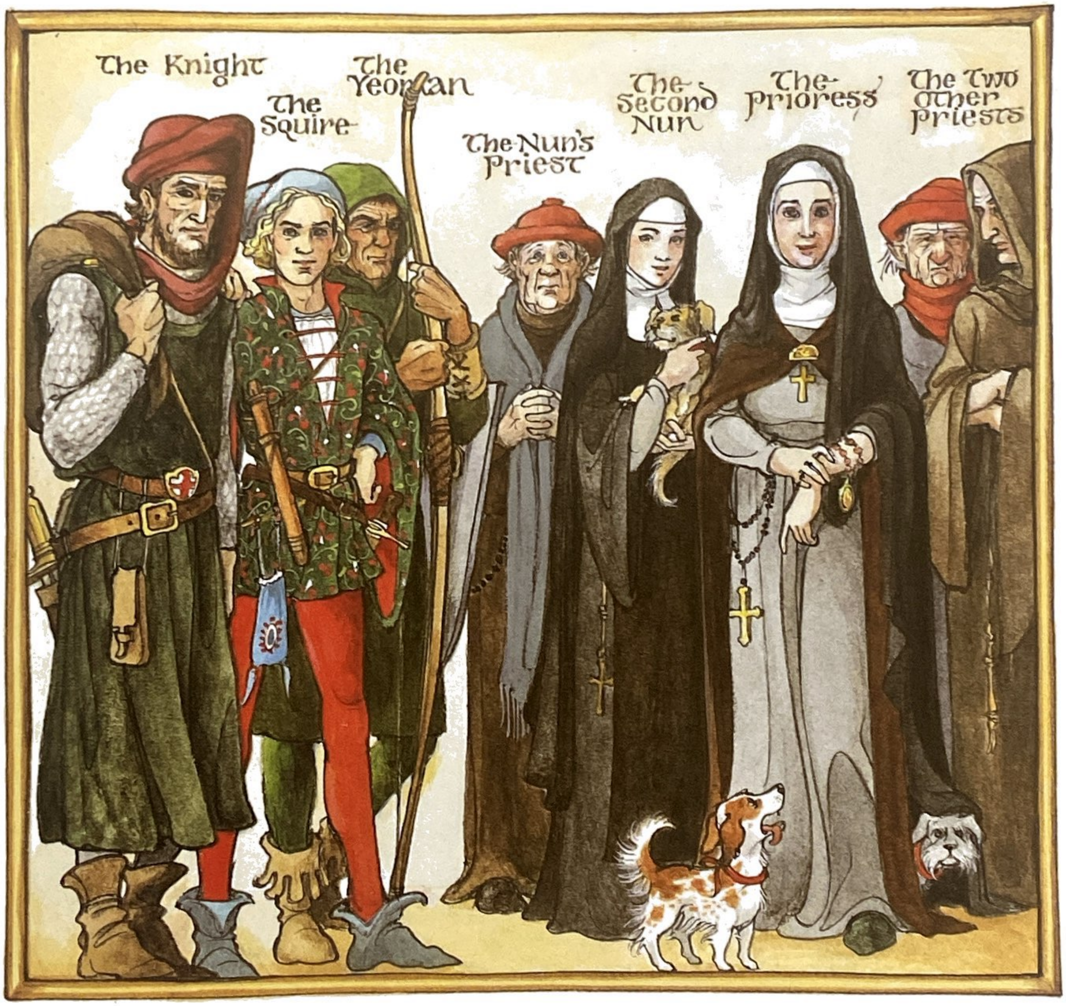
He decided to spend the night at the Tabard Inn in a

London suburb called Southwark. By chance, thirty other pilgrims had gathered that evening at the same place. They agreed to travel together. Harry Bailey, the host of the Tabard, said, "I haven't seen such a cheerful bunch in this place all year. I know you want to have a good time on the way. It's no fun to ride along silent as stones. What do you think of this idea? I'll come with you—at my own


The Monk
The Friar
The Merchant
The Scholar
The Lawyer
The Franklin

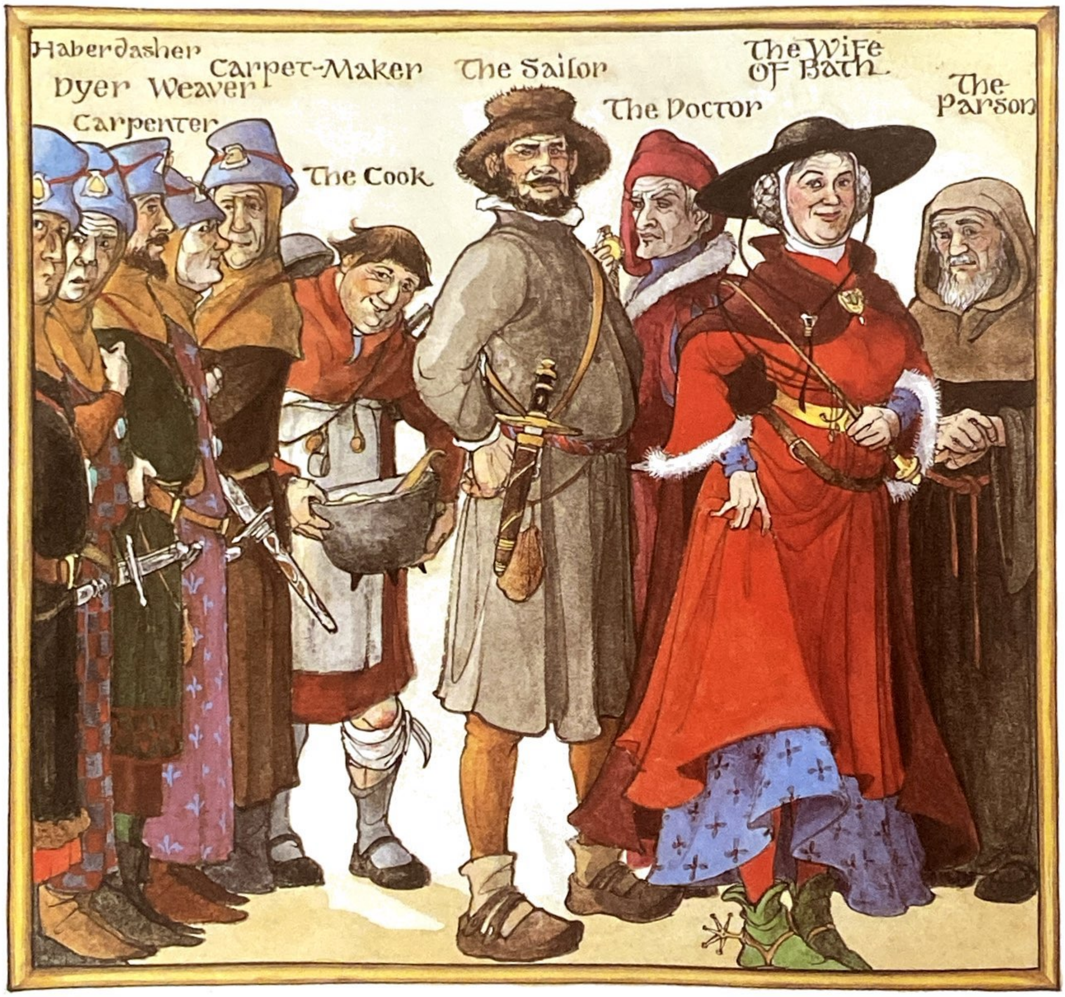
expense. On the way down, each one of you will tell two stories; on the way back, each one will tell two more stories. I'll be the judge; whoever tells the best story will be treated to dinner here at my Inn by the others when we get back. But anyone who argues with my rulings will have to pay the expenses of the whole trip!"

They all agreed. The next morning the pilgrims set out.


The Knight
The Squire
The Yeoman
The Nun's Priest
The Second Nun
The Prioress
The Two other Priests

Afterward Chaucer wrote down the events of that springtime journey. He described the pilgrims. He recorded their conversations. And he retold their stories.

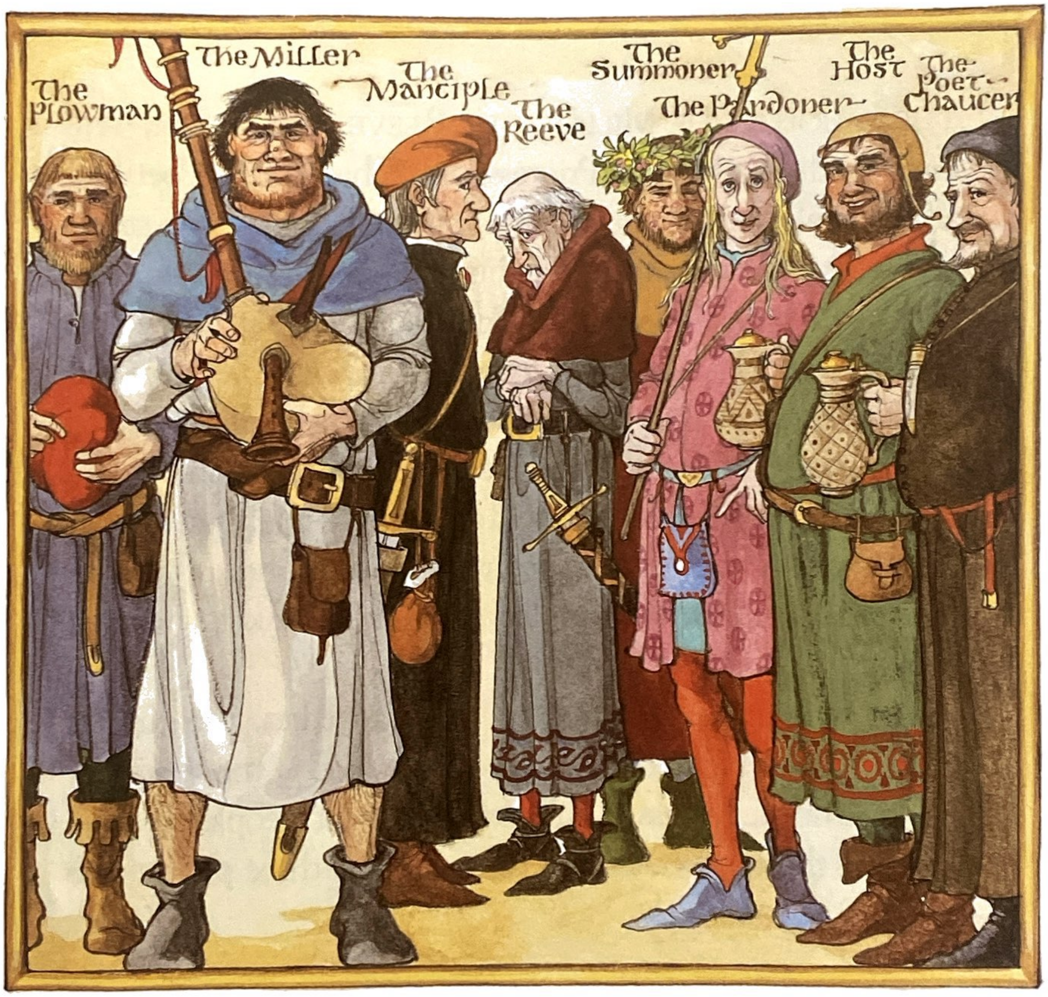
Or did he? Perhaps he made it all up. Surely he made some of it up. And he never recounted 128 stories. Maybe he never meant to. But the twenty-three he did write down are enough to make people like me, who love a well-told tale, revere him to this day.


Haberdasher
Dyer
Weaver
Carpenter
Carpet-Maker
The Cook
The Sailor
The Doctor
The Wife of Bath
The Parson

I'm going to tell you four of these stories. I tell them in my own words, not in Chaucer's, though his words are best. But English has changed so much in the last six hundred years that Chaucer's language seems almost like a foreign tongue.

For the liberties I've taken, I beg your pardon, and Geoffrey Chaucer's pardon too.

BARBARA COHEN


The Plowman
The Miller
The Manciple
The Reeve
The Summoner
The Pardoner
The Host
The Poet Chaucer

PROLOGUE TO THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE

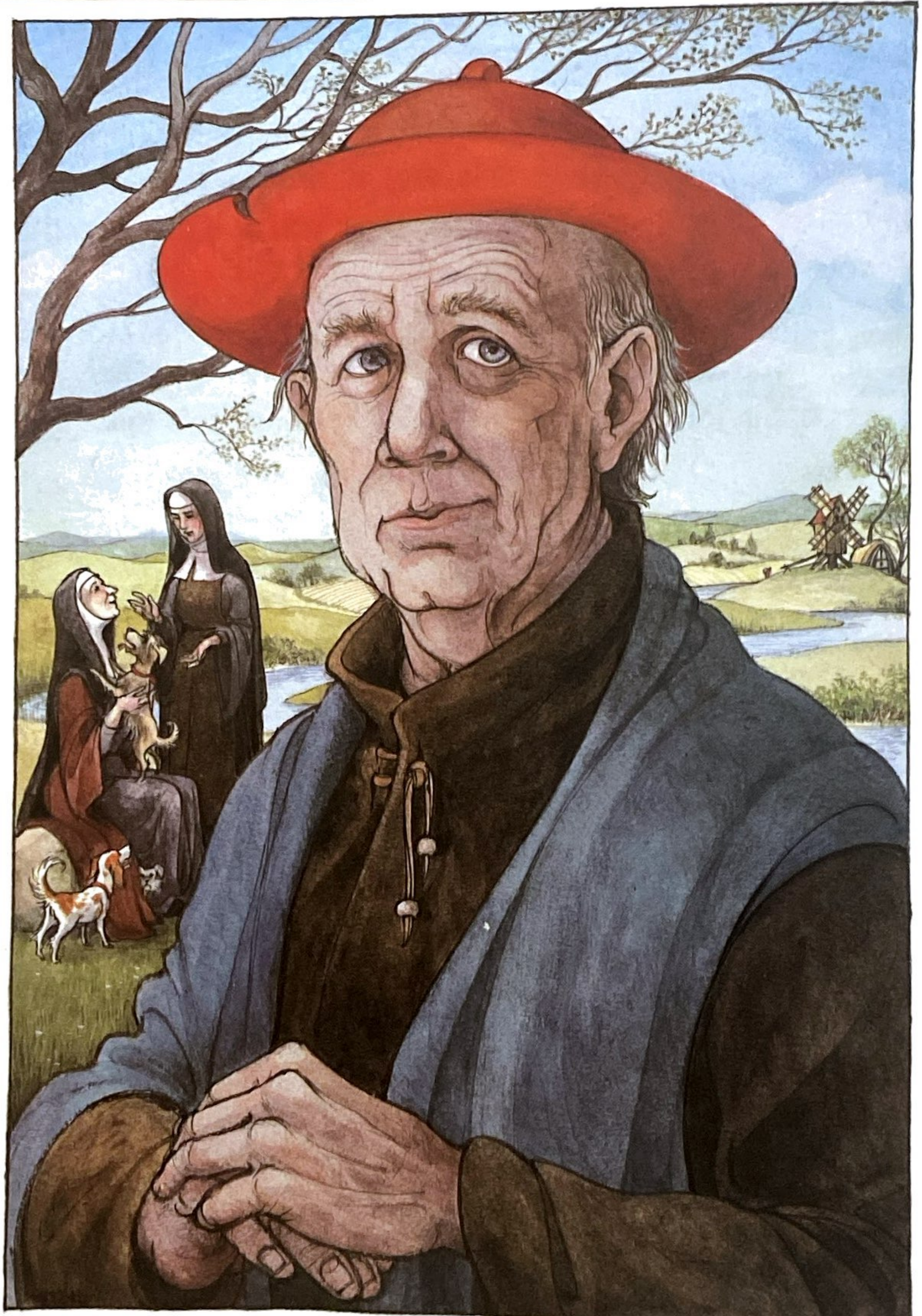
THE KNIGHT, THE MILLER, THE REEVE, THE COOK, THE Lawyer, the Sailor, the Prioress, and Chaucer the Poet had all told tales when the Host asked the Monk for a story.

The Monk was a famous hunter. He wasn't pale as a ghost, the way cloistered monks should be, but husky and bright-eyed. He rode a big brown horse, with bells on the bridle that jangled in the wind like a chapel bell. He loved a fat swan best of all roast meats served for dinner. The Host thought the Monk would tell a jolly tale, but instead he showed off his learning by recounting stories of famous men and women who'd fallen from high rank to horrible deaths.

After listening to seventeen such tragedies, the Knight cried, "Stop! No more! What you've said is true enough, but a little heaviness is sufficient for most people."

Then the Host called out to one of the three priests who were traveling with the Prioress. "Hey, priest," he boomed. "Come here, Sir John. Tell us something that'll gladden our hearts. Be happy, even though you're riding on an old nag. So your horse is ugly and skinny. What does that matter, as long as he gets you where you're going. See that your heart is always cheerful."

"Yes, sir," said the Nun's Priest. "If my story isn't enjoyable, you're right to blame me." And that sweet priest, that good Sir John, immediately launched into this tale.



The Nun's Priest

THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE

ONCE, NEAR A WOOD IN A VALLEY, A poor old widow lived in a narrow cottage. It's about this widow that I'll tell you a story.

Since her husband's death, she'd lived a simple life. She didn't have much money; she didn't have many animals. But from what God gave her, she managed to support herself and her two daughters. She had three large sows, three cows, and a sheep named Mollie. Her rooms were full of soot and her meals were plain and spare, like her hut. She never dressed her food in spicy sauces or swallowed dainty tidbits. She wasn't in any danger of getting sick from eating too much! Simple meals were her medicine. The gout didn't prevent her from dancing; apoplexy didn't give her a headache. Her meals weren't white and red, like wine, for she drank no wine. They were white and black—she had plenty of milk, brown bread, broiled bacon, and sometimes an egg or two, because she was a kind of dairywoman.

In a yard enclosed by sticks and a dry ditch, she kept a cock named Chauntecleer. He was the most famous crower in the whole country. His voice was merrier than the merriest organ playing for mass in church. His crowing marked time more accurately than any clock, even the one in the abbey. Instinctively he knew exactly when the hour began. As soon as the sun had risen above the horizon, he crowed perfectly. His comb was redder than coral and notched like the top of a castle wall. His bill was black and shone like jet. His legs and toes were blue. His nails were whiter than lilies, and his feathers were the color of burnished gold.

This noble rooster ruled over seven hens, whose work it was to please him. They were his sisters and his wives, and they were colored just like him. The one with the most beautiful hues on her throat was called fair Lady Pertelote. Polite, well spoken, gracious, friendly, and well behaved, she'd locked up the heart of Chauntecleer when she was only seven days old. As the bright sun rose, it was a joy to hear them sing together, "My Love Has Gone to a Far Country." For in those days, I've been told, animals and birds could speak and sing.

One early morning Chauntecleer sat on his perch in his coop among all his wives. Next to him sat lovely Pertelote. Chauntecleer began to groan like a man dreaming nightmares. Pertelote was horrified. "Dear heart," she said, "what ails you?"

"Madam," he answered, "I beg you, don't be upset. Just now I dreamed I was in such danger that my heart sinks with fear. I dreamed I was walking up and down in our yard when I saw a beast like a dog. He would have seized me and killed me. He was yellowish red, and his tail and both his ears were tipped with black. He had a small snout and two glowing eyes. I almost died just looking at him. No doubt this caused my groaning."

"Shame on you," said Pertelote. "You're a coward. By God above, you've lost my heart. I can't love a coward. No matter what she says, what every woman wants is a husband who's brave, wise, noble, trustworthy, and generous. How dare you say to your love that you're afraid? You have a beard like a man; you should have a man's heart too.

"Can you really be afraid of dreams?" she continued. "God knows, a dream is nothing but nonsense. Dreams come from eating too much. Certainly this dream came out of the great quantities of red fluid in you. Red fluid makes people dream of red flames, of red beasts who'll bite them, of fighting, and of young dogs. Too much black liquid makes people cry out in their sleep because they're afraid of black bears or black bulls or black devils who'll carry them away. I could tell you about other fluids that create a lot of trouble for a man in his sleep.

"Didn't Cato, a very wise man, say, 'Pay no attention to dreams'? Now sir," she said, "for the love of God, when we fly down from this roost, do take a laxative. Since there's no pharmacy in this town, I myself will find the herbs in our yard that'll clean you out below and above. You're already so hot, if the sun heats you up some more, I'll bet a penny you'll come down with a fever or an ague that'll be your death. For a couple of days you'll take digestives of worms, followed by laxatives made out of laurel, centaury, hellebore, caper berry, or the ground ivy growing in our yard. Peck them up just as they grow and eat them. Be brave, husband, for your father's sake. Don't be afraid of any dream. That's all I have to say to you."

"Madam," he returned, "many thanks for your lessons. Concerning Sir Cato, so famous for his wisdom, maybe he taught us not to be afraid of dreams. But, by God, people can read in ancient books about many men who knew a lot more than old Cato ever did, and they're all of the opposite opinion. We don't have to argue about this. The actual proof is in what happens.

"One of the greatest authors tells about two men who went on a pilgrimage. They came to a town that was so crowded they couldn't find even a hut where they could stay together. They had to separate, each to spend the night where he could. One of them had to sleep in a stall with plough oxen. As luck, which rules us all, would have it, the other found a good enough place.

"Long before day, this man dreamed in his bed that his friend began to call him. 'O dear brother! In the ox's stall where I sleep, I'll be murdered tonight. Now help me or I die. Quickly, come to me!'

"The man in the bed awoke shaking with fear, but then he turned over. He thought his dream was just nonsense. He dreamed this dream twice. In the third dream his friend came to him and said, 'I'm slain now. Look at my bloody wounds! Get up early in the morning, and at the west gate of the town, you'll see a cart full of dung. Stop that cart. In it, my body's hidden. They murdered me for my money.'

"The next day, as soon as it was light, the man looked for his friend. When he came to the ox's stall, he called his friend's name. The stableman said to him, 'Sir, your friend is gone. As soon as day broke, he left the town.'

"The man remembered his dreams. He rushed to the west gate of the town and found a dung cart going out as if it were carrying manure to the fields. 'My friend was murdered last night,' he shouted. 'In this cart he lies face up, his mouth open. I cry out to the authorities who're supposed to keep order in this city. Help! Help! Here lies my friend, slain.'

"What should I add to this tale? The people hurried out and threw the cart to the ground. In the middle of the dung they found the murdered man. O blessed God, so just and true, you always reveal murder! Murder will out; we see that every day. Murder is so loathsome and abominable to the just and reasonable God that he won't allow it to be concealed, though it hides for a year, or two, or three.

Murder will out, that's my conclusion. The authorities seized the carter and the stableman, who confessed their wickedness and were hanged by the neck. From this, people can see that they should be afraid of dreams.

"If I'm lying," Chauntecleer went on, "let me never know joy. In that same book, in the very next chapter, I read about two men who needed to sail over the sea to a far country. But the wind was against them, forcing them to wait in a city by the harbor. One day, toward evening, the wind changed. Happy, they went to bed, planning to get up early and sail away. Near day, one of the two dreamed that a man stood by his bedside and said, 'If you go away tomorrow, you'll be drowned. That's all.'

"He woke and told his friend what he had dreamed, and begged him to cancel his trip. His friend laughed scornfully. 'No dream,' he said, 'will so frighten my heart that I'll change my plans. I don't care a straw for such dreamings. Dreams are nonsense. Men dream all day of owls and apes, of things that never were nor ever will be. I'm sorry that you're going to stay here and waste your time. Good day!'

"And so he went away. Before the voyage was half over—I don't know how it happened, but accidentally—the ship's bottom split, and the ship and men went down. Ships nearby that had sailed out on the same tide saw the whole thing.

"Dame Pertelote, I beg you, look into the Bible, at

Daniel. Did he think dreams were nonsense? Read about Joseph too. There you'll see that dreams are sometimes—I don't say all the time—warnings of things that'll happen later. Look at the king of Egypt, Sir Pharaoh, and also his baker and his butler. Did they find no truth in dreams? Whoever studies history can read many wonderful things about dreams. Look at Croesus, king of Lydia. Didn't he dream that he sat on a tree, which meant he would be hanged? Look at Andromache, Hector's wife. The night before Hector was killed, she dreamed he would die if he went into battle. She warned him, but he didn't listen. He went out to fight and was slain by Achilles.

"Well, that tale's too long to tell now. It's almost dawn. I'll have to conclude briefly. I know from this dream that I'll have trouble. Furthermore, I don't believe in laxatives. I'm sure they're poisonous. I defy them!

"But let's change the subject now, and talk about happy things. Madam Pertelote, when I see your beautiful face, so scarlet red around your eyes, all my fear dies. At night, when I feel your soft side next to me, I'm so full of joy and comfort, I defy dreams."

It was day. Chauntecleer and his hens flew down from their roost. He wasn't afraid anymore. He roamed up and down the yard on his toes, not lowering himself to put his heel on the ground. He was fierce as a lion. He found a grain of wheat. "Cluck, cluck," he called, and all his wives ran to him. He was as royal as a prince in his castle, when this adventure I'm going to tell you about happened.

It was the third day of May. Proudly Chauntecleer lifted his eyes to the sun and crowed magnificently. "The sun," he cried, "has climbed up into heaven. Madam Pertelote, my bliss in this world, listen to the joyful birds sing. See the fresh flowers spring up. My heart is full of delight."

But suddenly a terrible thing happened. God knows that in this world trouble always follows joy. A scholar could write that down in a book as the absolute truth. This story is also true, I swear, as true as any tale of King Arthur's court you ever read.

A tricky red and black fox had lived in the wood for three years. The night before, after months of careful planning, he broke through the hedge into the yard where Chauntecleer and his wives spent their time. He lay quietly in a cabbage patch until after nine in the morning, waiting for his chance to fall on Chauntecleer and kill him, like criminals who lie in wait for human beings.

O false murderer, lurking in your den! O new Judas Iscariot! O Chauntecleer, cursed be the day you flew down into the yard from your roost! Your dreams warned you that day would be dangerous for you.

Does God's exalted foreknowledge force me to do a thing, or is free choice granted me to do that thing or not do it? A hundred thousand scholars argue this issue in schools. I won't have anything to do with such learned discussions. My tale is of a cock who unfortunately took his wife's advice and went for a walk in the yard on the morning after that bad dream I told you about.

The advice of women is often fatal. It was a woman's advice that forced Adam from Paradise, where he'd been so happy and comfortable. Well, I don't know who might be offended if I criticize women's advice, so forget I said that. I was only fooling. Those were the cock's words, not mine. Personally, I don't know any harm of women.

In the sunshine, Pertelote and her sisters bathed happily in the sand. Chauntecleer sang more cheerfully than mermaids in the sea. Then, as he glanced at a butterfly among the cabbages, he suddenly noticed this fox lying low. "Cock-a-doodle-doo," he cried out, his heart struck with terror. For by instinct a creature will run away from an enemy, even one he's never seen before.

But the fox said, "Dear, sir, where are you going? Are you afraid of *me*, your friend? I haven't come to spy on you. I came only to hear you sing. Truly, you have a voice as wonderful as any angel's in Heaven. You have more feeling for music than any musician. Your father—God bless his soul—and your mother too, out of their great kindness, have been in my house, to my great enjoyment. And so, sir, I'd like to please you. If men speak about singing, I tell them that, as surely as I can see with my two eyes, except for you I never heard a man sing like your father in the morning. He sang from the heart. To make his voice stronger, he would shut his eyes, stand on his tiptoes, and stretch out his long, slender neck. There was no man anywhere greater than he in song or wisdom. Now sing, sir, for holy charity. Let's see if you can imitate your father."

Chauntecleer beat his wings, so charmed by this flattery that he never suspected treachery. Lords, there's many a false flatterer in your courts, and many a hypocrite who pleases you more than those who tell you the truth. Read Ecclesiastes in the Bible, lords, and beware of treachery.

Chauntecleer stood high upon his toes, stretched out his neck, closed his eyes, and began to crow. Sir Russell the fox leaped up and seized Chauntecleer and carried him toward the wood.

O destiny that may not be avoided! A pity that Chauntecleer flew down from the perch! A pity that his wife paid no attention to dreams! And all these misfortunes happened on a Friday.

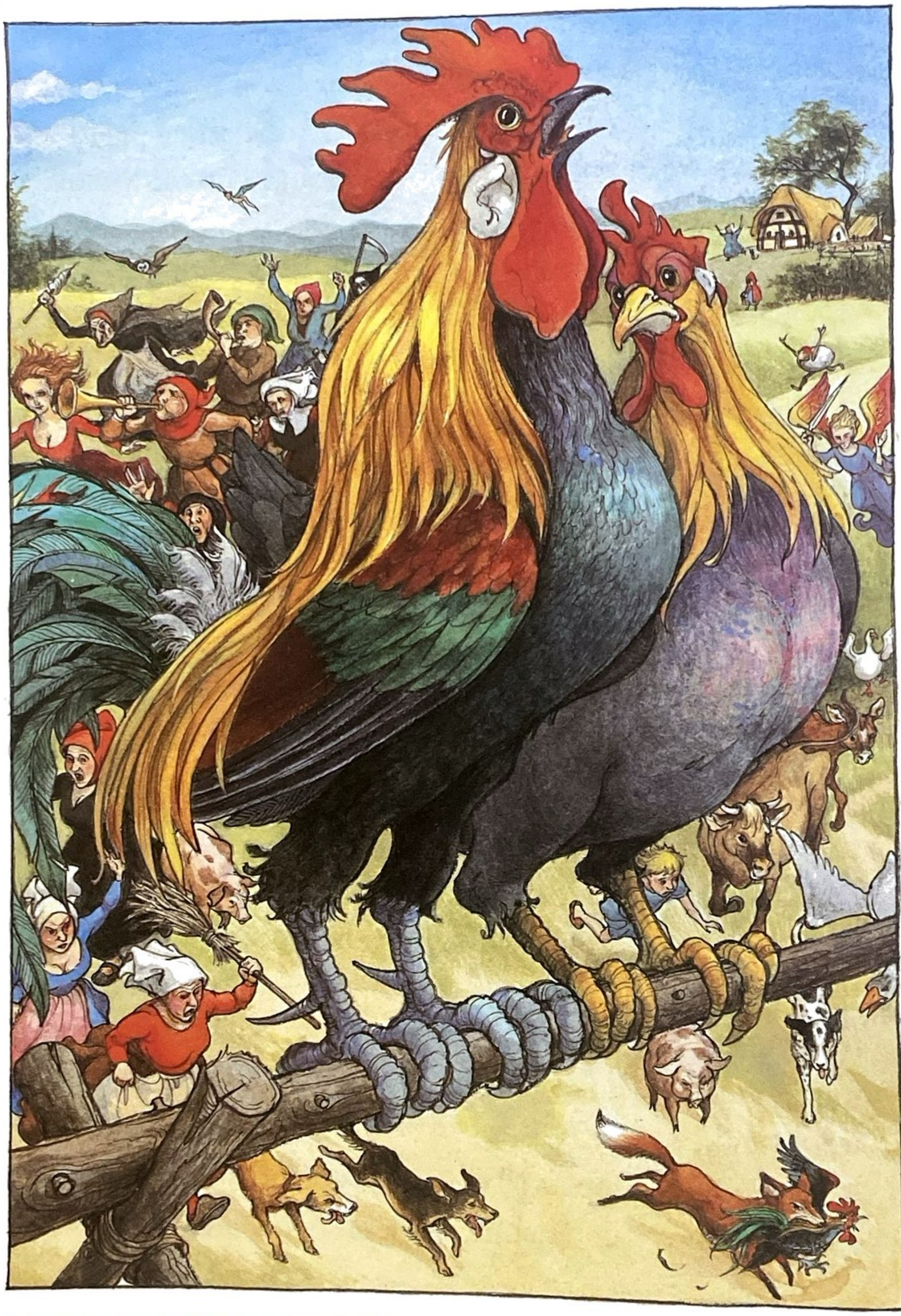
O Venus, the goddess of pleasure, Chauntecleer was your servant. Would you allow him to die on your day? O Master Geoffrey of Vinsauf, when your worthy king, Richard the Lionheart, was slain with an arrow on a Friday, you complained bitterly about his death. Why don't I have the words and skill to scold Friday, as you did? Then I'd show you how I could lament for Chauntecleer's fear and pain.

When the Greeks won Troy, and Pyrrhus, with his sword drawn, seized King Priam by the beard and slew him, we're told that the Trojan ladies cried and wept. That was nothing compared to the noise the hens made in the coop when they saw Chauntecleer carried off. Above all, Dame Pertelote shrieked louder than Hasdrubal's wife. Her husband lost his life when the Romans burned Carthage, and she ran on purpose into the fire and burned herself. O woeful hens, you had as much right to cry as the senators' wives whose husbands died when Nero burned Rome. Though they hadn't done anything wrong, Nero killed them.

But now I must get back to my story. The unlucky widow and her two daughters heard the hens shrieking. They rushed outdoors to see the fox hurrying toward the wood, carrying the cock across his shoulder.

"Stop! Help! The fox!" they called. The neighbors heard and ran after him with sticks. Coll and Talbot and Gerland, our dogs, ran after him. Malkyn, with her distaff in her hand, ran after him. The cow and calf ran after him. Even the pigs, so frightened by the dogs barking and the men and women shouting, ran after him, yelling like fiends in hell. The ducks cried out as if they were being slaughtered. The frightened geese flew over the trees. The bees swarmed out of the hive. The villagers came with trumpets of brass, wood, horn, and bone, blowing and piping, shrieking and whooping. It seemed as if the heavens would fall.

Now, good people, I beg you, listen. Look how Fortune suddenly robs our enemies too of hope and pride. This



cock, in spite of his fear, spoke to the fox. "Sir, if I were you, I'd say, 'Turn back, you foolish fellows! A plague on all of you! I'm at the edge of the wood; in spite of all your efforts, I'll keep the cock, and I'll eat him up, right now!"

The fox answered, "It shall be done." And the moment he opened his mouth, the cock broke free and flew high into a tree.

"O dear, Chauntecleer!" exclaimed the fox. "I've done you wrong. I scared you when I seized you and carried you out of the yard. But sir, I didn't intend any harm. Come down, and I'll tell you what I really meant. I'll tell you the truth, God help me!"

"No," said Chauntecleer. "I curse us both, myself first. May my blood and my bones be doomed if you fool me more than once. You won't flatter me again into singing with my eyes shut. God will never prosper a creature who stubbornly shuts his eyes when he should see."

"No," said the fox. "Rather let God give bad luck to a creature who's so lacking in self-control that he chatters when he should keep his mouth shut."

That's what happens when you're careless and believe in flattery. Those of you who think this tale is foolishness because it's about a fox, a cock, and a hen, make sure you understand the moral. Take the grain, and let the chaff remain. Good God, if it's your will, make us all good too, and bring us to heaven! Amen.

THE PARDONER'S PROLOGUE

NEXT, THE DOCTOR TOLD A SAD STORY. WHEN HE WAS done, the Host said, "You've made me so miserable that I almost had a heart attack. Unless I have a drink of ale or hear something happy, my heart's lost. You, Pardoner, my good friend, tell us some jokes."

"I'll do it," said the Pardoner. "But first I'll have a drink and a bite at this alehouse here."

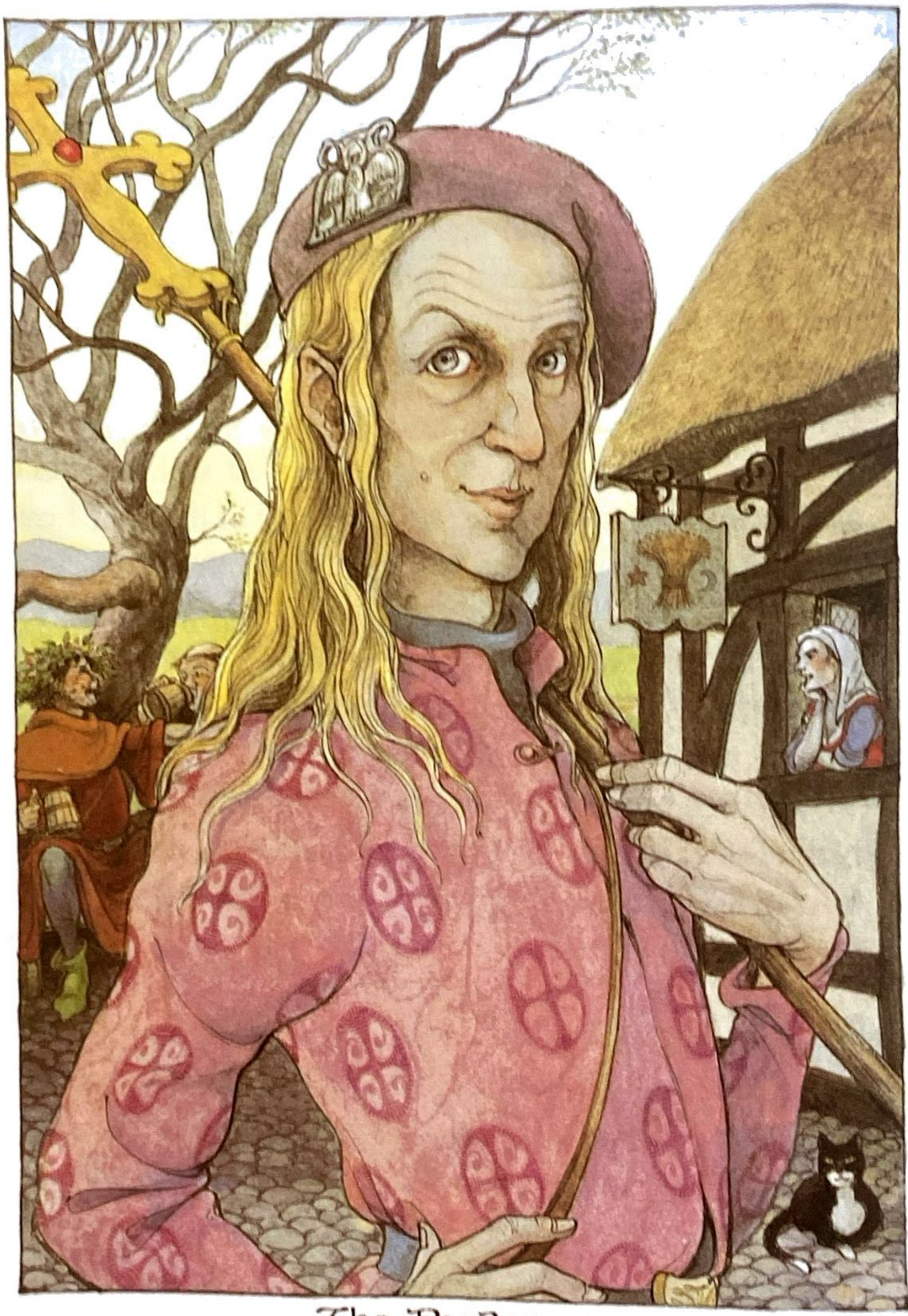
The rest of the group cried out, "Don't let him tell us anything filthy! Let him tell us a story that teaches a lesson. We'll gladly listen to that."

"Agreed," said the Pardoner. "But I have to have a drink in order to think up something decent."

The Pardoner, dressed in the latest fashion, wore his long, thin blond locks carefully arranged over his shoulders. He was beardless, with eyes as bright as a hare's and a high voice like a goat's. He had just come from Rome. His pouch was full of pardons. He was so skillful at his trade that he could persuade poor country people who listened to him preach that a pillowcase was Our Lady's veil, or that a piece of sail he carried was from St. Peter's boat. He made them believe that if they bought his pardons, they'd go right to heaven when they died. He could get more silver out of poor people in one day than an honest country parson could earn in two months.

"When I preach in churches," he said, "I have only one subject: 'The love of money is the root of evil.' I preach against my own vice. Although I'm guilty of that sin, I can make other people repent of it. But that's not the purpose of my preaching. I do it only for money. I won't work with my hands. I won't imitate the Apostles. I'll have money, wool, cheese, and bread, even though the children of the poorest widow in the village are starving.

"But listen, you want me to tell a story. Now that I've had a drink, I'll tell you one you'll like. Though I'm a bad man myself, I can tell a moral tale. Be quiet, and I'll begin."



The Pardoner

THE PARDONER'S TALE

ONCE IN FLANDERS THERE LIVED A gang of young people who gambled and drank in brothels and taverns. Day and night they danced to harps, lutes, and guitars; played at dice; and ate and drank too much. Their oaths were so great it was horrible to hear them swear. Their curses tore our Lord's blessed body, and they laughed at one another's sins. Good-looking dancing girls, young fruit sellers, and singers with harps would entertain them, as well as cake vendors, who are truly the devil's workers, because greed kindles sinful desires. I take the Bible as my witness that great evil lies in wine and drunkenness. Look at Lot, who was so drunk he didn't know what he was doing. When Herod was full of wine at his own table, he ordered the innocent John the Baptist killed. I know Seneca speaks wisely when he says he can't see any difference between a man who's crazy and one who's drunk, except that madness, when it falls on a sinner, lasts longer.

O cursed greed, cause of our first fall, origin of our damnation, until Christ redeemed us with his blood! All the world was corrupted because of overeating. In the Bible I read that while Adam controlled his appetite, he was in Paradise, but when he ate the forbidden fruit, he was immediately cast out into the world of sorrow and pain. If people knew how many sicknesses result from stuffing themselves, they'd be more careful about what they ate. It's a foul thing when a man drinks so much white and red wine that he turns his throat into a toilet. O stomach! O belly! O stinking bag, full of dung and corruption! At both your ends is a filthy sound. What hard work and great expense it is to support you! These cooks, how they pound and strain and grind to satisfy you! They make delicious sauces out of leaf spices, bark, and roots to tempt the appetite. But it's certain that he who resorts to such delicacies is dead even while he lives in his vices.

Wine brings lust and drunkenness. It's full of quarreling and wretchedness. O drunkard, your face is ugly, your breath is sour, you're filthy to touch, and you make a sound through your nose as if you were saying "Samson, Samson," though God knows Samson never drank any wine. You fall down as if you were a stuck pig; your tongue is lost, and so is your self-respect. A drunkard can't stay away from the white wine of Lepe that's sold in Fish Street or Cheapside. This tricky Spanish wine somehow creeps into other wines growing next to it, and such fumes rise from it that when a man swallows three drinks, although he thinks he's at home in Cheapside, he's actually in the town of Lepe snorting "Samson, Samson."

Now that I've talked about greed, I'll warn you against gambling. Gambling is the mother of loss, deceit, and lies; it's blasphemy against Christ; manslaughter; and a waste of money and time. What dishonor to be known as a common gambler! The higher the gambler's rank, the greater his disgrace. If a prince uses gambling in government, his reputation collapses.

Look at King Demetrius. We're told in a book that the king of Parthia sent him a pair of golden dice, scorning him because he'd been a gambler. Lords can find honest games to pass the time.

Now I'll talk about false testimony and swearing, as old books do. Swearing is disgusting, and swearing falsely is even worse. Notice the Ten Commandments; in the second God says, "Don't take my name in vain." He forbids such swearing just as he does murder and other sins. "By God's precious heart." "By his nails." "By the blood of Christ, I rolled a lucky seven, and you a five and three." "By God's arms, if you cheat me, this dagger shall cut through your heart!" I tell you plainly, he who utters such outrageous curses will pay for it.

Lying, anger, cheating, and murder are the fruit of a pair of cursed dice. Now for the love of Christ, who died for us, stop your oaths, both great and small.

But now I must tell you my tale.

Long before six one morning, three boozers sat in a tavern drinking. They heard a bell clanging in front of a corpse being carried to its grave. One of them called out to the servant, "Go ask whose corpse passes by, and be careful to get the name right!"

"Sir," said the boy, "I don't have to ask. I heard his name two hours before you got here. He was an old friend of yours. Suddenly last night, sitting up on his bench drunk as can be, he was killed. The stealthy thief people call Death cut his heart in two with a spear and went away without saying a word. He slays all the people in this country. He's killed thousands with the plague. Master, it seems to me that before you run into such an enemy, you'd better be careful. Be ready to meet him at any time. That's what my mother taught me. I say no more."

"By St. Mary," said the barkeep, "the boy tells the truth. This year in a large village over a mile from here, Death has killed men, women, children, servants, and pages. I believe he lives there. It would be wise to be careful, lest he hurt you."

"God's arms!" cried the wastrel. "Is he so dangerous to meet? By God's honorable bones, I'll look for him in every highway and street. Listen, friends, we three have been as one. Let's swear to be one another's brothers and slay this false traitor, Death. By God's honor, he who kills so many will himself be killed before night."

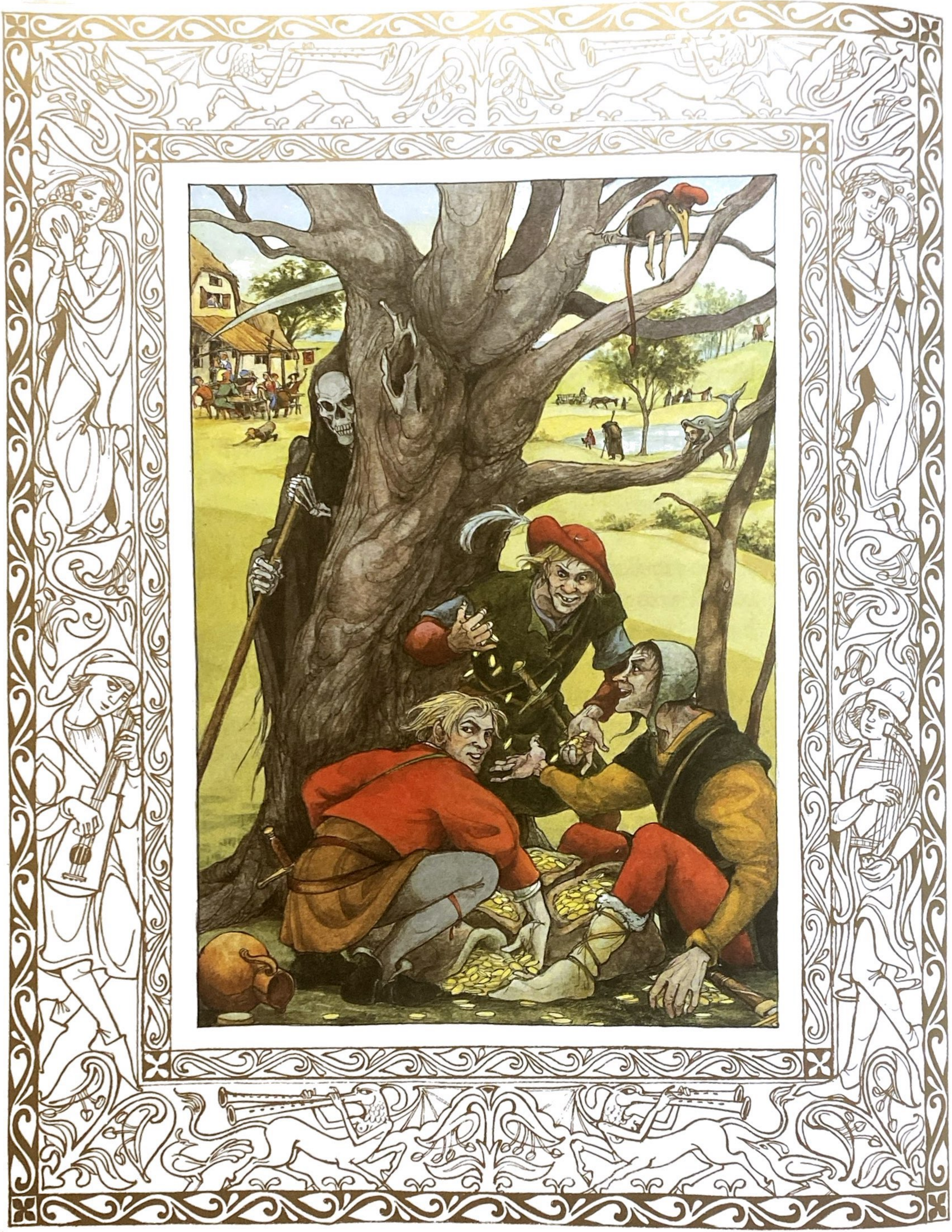
The three of them promised to live and die for one another as if they'd been born brothers. They rushed out in a drunken fury and started toward the village the barkeep had told them about. They swore terrible oaths on Christ's blessed wounded body that Death would be dead, if only they could find him.

They hadn't gone half a mile when they came to a fence. They were about to climb over it when they met a poor old man. Humbly he greeted them: "Lords, may God keep you."

The proudest replied, "Bad luck to you, fellow! Why are you all wrapped up, so only your face shows? Why did you live to be so old?"

The old man looked straight at him and said, "Because I couldn't find a man in city or town, though I walked all the way to India, who would trade his youth for my old age. So I must remain as old as I am for as long as God wills. Death won't take my life. I walk around like a restless prisoner, knocking on the earth with my stick, crying, 'Mother, see how I waste away, flesh, blood, and skin. When shall my bones rest? Let me in.' Yet she won't do me that favor, so my face has turned pale and withered.

"But, gentlemen, it's impolite of you to speak so rudely to an old man who's neither done nor said anything to harm you. In holy writings you can read, 'Stand up when



you meet an old, white-haired man.' I'll give you this advice—don't insult an old man now, if you don't want to be insulted when you're old, if you should live so long. God be with you, wherever you travel. Now I must go where I must go."

Immediately the second gambler said, "No, old fellow, not so. By St. John, you won't get away from us so easily. You just spoke of that traitor Death who's killed all our friends in this country. You're his spy! Tell us where he is, or you'll suffer for it, by God's holy sacrament! You and he are working together to kill young people like us, you lying thief."

"Now, gentlemen," the old man replied, "if you're so anxious to find Death, turn up this crooked road. I left him in that grove, under a tree, and there he'll stay. May God who saved mankind save you!" So said this old man.

Each of these rioters ran till he came to that tree. There they found nearly eight bushels of round gold florins! They didn't go looking for Death any longer. They were so glad to see all the bright beautiful money that they sat down by the precious treasure.

The worst of them spoke first. "Brothers," he said, "listen to me. Though I fool around, I'm smart. Chance has led us to this treasure so that we can live our lives enjoying ourselves. We'll spend it as easily as we got it. By God's precious honor, whoever thought we'd be so lucky? We should carry this gold to my house or yours, because you know perfectly well it belongs to us. But we don't dare do that in daylight. People would say we're thieves and hang us for the treasure that's rightfully ours. We have to carry it away at night, as secretly and carefully as possible. I suggest we draw lots. The one who pulls the short straw will run to town and bring back bread and wine. The other two will watch this treasure. When it's dark, we'll carry it wherever we decide is best."

Then one of them brought straws in his fist and told them to draw and look to see on which one the choice would fall. It fell on the youngest, and he immediately rushed off to town. As soon as he was gone, one of the two remaining said to the other, "You're my sworn brother. I'll tell you something that'll prove worth listening to. Here's plenty of gold, to be divided among the three of us. But if I could fix it so that it were divided between us two only, wouldn't I have done you a favor, like a good friend?"

The other replied, "I don't know how you can do that. Our companion knows perfectly well the gold is here with us. How could we get it? What could we say to him?"

"Can you keep a secret?" said the first scoundrel. "I'll tell you what we'll do."

"I swear," said the other, "I won't betray you."

"Well, then," said the first, "you know we're two, and two are stronger than one. When he sits down, you get up immediately as if you meant to have some fun with him, and while you're struggling with him as if you were playing, I'll thrust him through both sides with my dagger, and you do the same with yours. Then all this gold will be divided between you and me. We'll be able to do whatever we want and play with dice whenever we feel like it." And so, as I've told you, it was agreed between these two scoundrels to murder the third.

The youngest, on his way to town, in his imagination fingered those beautiful bright new florins. "O Lord!" he said. "If I could have all this treasure to myself, there's no man living under God's throne who'd be as happy as I!" Finally our enemy, the devil, put it into his head that he should buy poison to kill his two friends. But the devil can destroy only those who're already on their way to damnation.

He hurried into the town to a pharmacist, whom he begged for poison to put down rats. He said there was also a weasel in his yard, killing his chickens. He would get revenge, if he could, on the vermin that attacked him at night.

The pharmacist replied, "I'll give you a mixture so powerful there isn't a creature in the world who wouldn't die immediately from eating or drinking an amount no bigger than a kernel of wheat. This poison is so strong that it kills in less time than it takes you to walk a mile."

This criminal took the box of poison in his hand and ran into the next street to a man from whom he borrowed three big bottles. Into two he poured the poison. The third he kept pure for his own drink. He planned to work all night carrying the gold away by himself. When he'd filled his three bottles with wine, he returned again to his companions.

There's no need to go on. Just as earlier they had planned his death, so they killed him. When that was done, one of them said, "Now let's drink and enjoy ourselves. Afterward we'll bury his body." As luck would have it, he took a poisoned bottle and drank, and gave it to his friend to drink too. They were both killed. Before they died, they suffered from the most horrible symptoms of poisoning ever described in a medical book. So these murderers and this false poisoner met Death.

Good men, God forgive all your sins and keep you from the sin of greed. My holy pardon can save you all, if you make an offering to me of gold or silver coins, or silver pins or spoons or rings. Come up, wives, and give me some of your wool. I will immediately write down your names, and you shall enter the bliss of Heaven. By my power I'll make those who give me money as clean and pure as you were the day you were born.

And so, gentlemen, this is how I preach. Jesus Christ, who is the doctor of our souls, grant that you receive *his* pardon. That's best; I won't lie to you.

"But fellow pilgrims," the Pardoner continued, "there's something I forgot to tell you. I have relics and pardons in my bag the equal of any in England. The Pope gave them to me with his own hand. If you give me honest money, I can give you a new pardon every mile that we travel. You're lucky to have a pardoner on this trip in case some accident should occur. One or two of you might fall off your horses and break your necks. I can absolve all of you when your souls pass from your bodies.

"I suggest the Host be first, because he's the most sinful. Come here, Sir Host, and make the first offering. You can kiss every relic for a penny. Open your purse right now!"

"No, no," the Host cried. "Christ curse me first. You'd swear your old pants were a saint's relic, though they were stained with your behind."

The Pardoner was so furious he wouldn't say another word.

"Well," said our Host, "I won't joke with you anymore, or with any other man who doesn't know how to take it."

But then the worthy Knight interrupted. "No more of this, enough! Sir Pardoner, cheer up. And you, Sir Host, whom I love, kiss the Pardoner. And Pardoner, come close to the rest of us, as before. Let's laugh and enjoy ourselves again." And then they kissed and rode on their way.

THE WIFE OF BATH'S PROLOGUE

THE WIFE OF BATH SPOKE NEXT. UNFORTUNATELY SHE was a little deaf. She could make cloth better than the weavers of Ypres and Ghent. She took precedence over all the other women of the parish. If anyone went up to make an offering before her, she was so angry that she was drained of all Christian charity. I swear the kerchiefs she wore on Sunday weighed more than ten pounds. She had on red stockings and soft new shoes. Her flushed face was bold and handsome. She'd been married five times, not counting other friends in her youth. A seasoned traveler who'd made pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome, and Boulogne, she sat comfortably on an ambling horse. Her hat was as big as a shield, and an overskirt covered her ample hips. She enjoyed laughing and joking. No doubt she knew all the cures for love, because she'd been an expert on that subject for years.

"If there were no authorities in this world," she said, "experience alone gives me the right to talk about the trouble that is in marriage. Thanks to the eternal God, I've been married five times, and all my husbands were respectable men. Not long ago someone told me that since Christ went to only one wedding, in Cana of Galilee, I should have married only once. But I know that God commanded us to be fruitful and multiply. He also said a man should leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife. But He didn't mention any number, so why should people consider five marriages a sin?

"Look at wise King Solomon: I believe he had more than one wife. Thank God I've married five men. The sixth will be welcome whenever he comes. To tell the truth, I won't stay single when my husband is gone from this world. Some Christian man will marry me soon enough. St. Paul said it's better to marry than to burn. Abraham and Jacob were holy men, and each of them had more than two wives. Can you show me any place where God forbade marriage in so many words? Men may advise women to stay single, but advice isn't a commandment.

"It may please some to be pure in body and soul. I don't boast about my condition. But all of a lord's plates aren't made out of gold; he has wooden ones too that do their job. God calls people to him in many ways.

"Christ, who is the source of all perfection, spoke to those who would live perfectly. Gentlemen, by your leave, I'm not one of them. I intend to use the flower of my years in the deeds and fruit of marriage."

The Pardoner interrupted: "Now, madam," said he, "By God and by St. John, you're an excellent preacher on this subject. Once I was about to wed a wife, but why should my body pay the price? I would rather not marry any woman this year."

"My tale has not begun," she said. "You'll drink from another barrel before I'm done, and it won't taste as good as ale. I'm an expert on trouble in marriage. I've been the cause of some of it myself. When I'm finished, you can chose whether you'll sip from the cask that I'll break open. Be careful before you approach it too closely. I'll give you more than ten examples. Ptolemy writes, 'He who will not be warned by other men shall be a warning to them.' Read those very words in his *Almagest.*"

"Madam," said the Pardoner, "I beg you, tell your tale. Spare no man's feelings, and teach us younger fellows what you know how to do."

"Gladly," said she, "since you seem to want me to. But I beg this company, if I speak my own ideas, don't take offense at what I say. My intention is only to amuse.

"Now, sir, I'll get on with my story. As surely as I drink wine and ale, I tell the truth when I say that three of my husbands were good and two were bad. Three were rich and old. Since they'd already given me their land and their money, I no longer needed to put any effort into winning their love or respecting them. They loved me so much that I didn't value their love. A woman will exert every effort to win love when she doesn't have it, but since I had them completely in my power, and since they'd given me all their land, why should I trouble to please them? But I ruled them so well that they were happy and eager to bring me pretty things from the fair. God knows, I often scolded them so spitefully that they were delighted when I spoke to them pleasantly.

"But my fourth husband was no good. He had a mistress, though I was young, full of love, stubborn, strong, and pretty as a magpie.

"Lord Christ! When I remember my youth and passion, I'm tickled to the bottom of my heart. To this day it does my heart good to think that I've had the world in my time. But age, which poisons everything, has robbed me of my strength and beauty. Let them go, farewell, and the devil go with them! The flour is gone; I must cheerfully try to make do with the chaff.

"Back to my fourth husband. As I was saying, I ate my heart out because he enjoyed another woman. But he was paid back, by God and St. Joce. I made him a cross out of the same wood. I seemed so attractive to people that I made him fry in his own grease from anger and jealousy. I was his purgatory on earth; may his soul rest in heaven now. He died when I came back from Jerusalem, and his grave's in the church under the crossbeam. His tomb isn't fancy; it would have been a waste to bury him expensively. God rest his soul!

"Now I'll tell you about my fifth husband, God save his soul. He was so mean to me that I still feel the pain in my ribs, and will till my dying day. But he was also so loving that although he beat me in every bone, he could soon win my love again. I believe I loved him best because he was stingy in his love for me. We women have a strange quirk; pick the thing we may not easily have, and that's what we'll crave and cry for all day long. Forbid us a thing, and that's what we want. Urge something on us, and that's what we'll run away from.

"I took my fifth husband for love, not money. He'd been a scholar at Oxford. He'd left the university and boarded with a friend of mine who lived in our town. I often visited my friend in the springtime because then I loved to be gay and walk from house to house to hear gossip. Once in Lent, Jenkin the scholar, my friend Dame Alice, and I went into the fields. Since my husband was in London all that season, I had the time to amuse myself and to see and be seen by the lively crowd. I appeared at vigils, processions, sermons, pilgrimages, miracle plays, and weddings, wearing bright scarlet gowns. Neither worms, moths, nor mites ate those dresses. Why? Because they were so well used.

"We walked in the fields, enjoying ourselves so much, this scholar and I, that I looked ahead and told him that if

I were a widow he should marry me. I was never without foresight about marriage, or anything else. A mouse isn't worth a green onion if he has only one hole to run to, because if that fails, he's done for.

"When my fourth husband was laid out on his bier, I wept continuously, as wives are supposed to, and covered my face with a handkerchief. But since I was already provided with a mate, I assure you I didn't really shed many tears.

"Next day my husband was carried to the church, accompanied by the neighbors who mourned him. Jenkin, our scholar, was one of the crowd. When I saw him following the coffin, I thought he had so fine a pair of legs that I gave him all my heart. He was twenty years old, and to tell you the truth, I was forty. But I was full of life, and good-looking, and rich. I followed my inclination, according to my stars. I was never careful about love, but gave in to my appetite. I didn't care if a man was short or tall, dark or fair, rich or poor, so long as he pleased me.

"To make a long story short, at the end of the month this handsome scholar Jenkin married me. I gave him all the lands and wealth that had earlier been given to me, and afterward, was I sorry! He wouldn't let me have anything I wanted. Once he struck me so hard on my ear, because I tore a page out of his book, that I became deaf. I visited from house to house as I'd always done, though he forbade it. I didn't care a fig for all his lectures. I wouldn't be corrected by him. I hate a person who tells me all my faults, and so do more of us than just me.

"Now I'll tell you why I tore a page out of his book, which made him hit me so that I went deaf. He had a book that for fun he'd read night and day. Whenever he had any spare time, he'd read in this book about wicked wives. He knew more stories about bad women than there are good women in the Bible. It's impossible for a scholar to speak well of any women except a saint. By God! If women, like scholars, had written stories, they'd have told about more of men's wicked deeds than all the sons of Adam could put right. When scholars are too old to love women, they sit down and write that women can't be faithful.

"But now, as to why I was beaten for a book: One night as he sat by the fire, Jenkin read in his book about Eve, who through her sin brought all mankind to misery, so that Jesus Christ himself died to redeem us with his heart's blood.

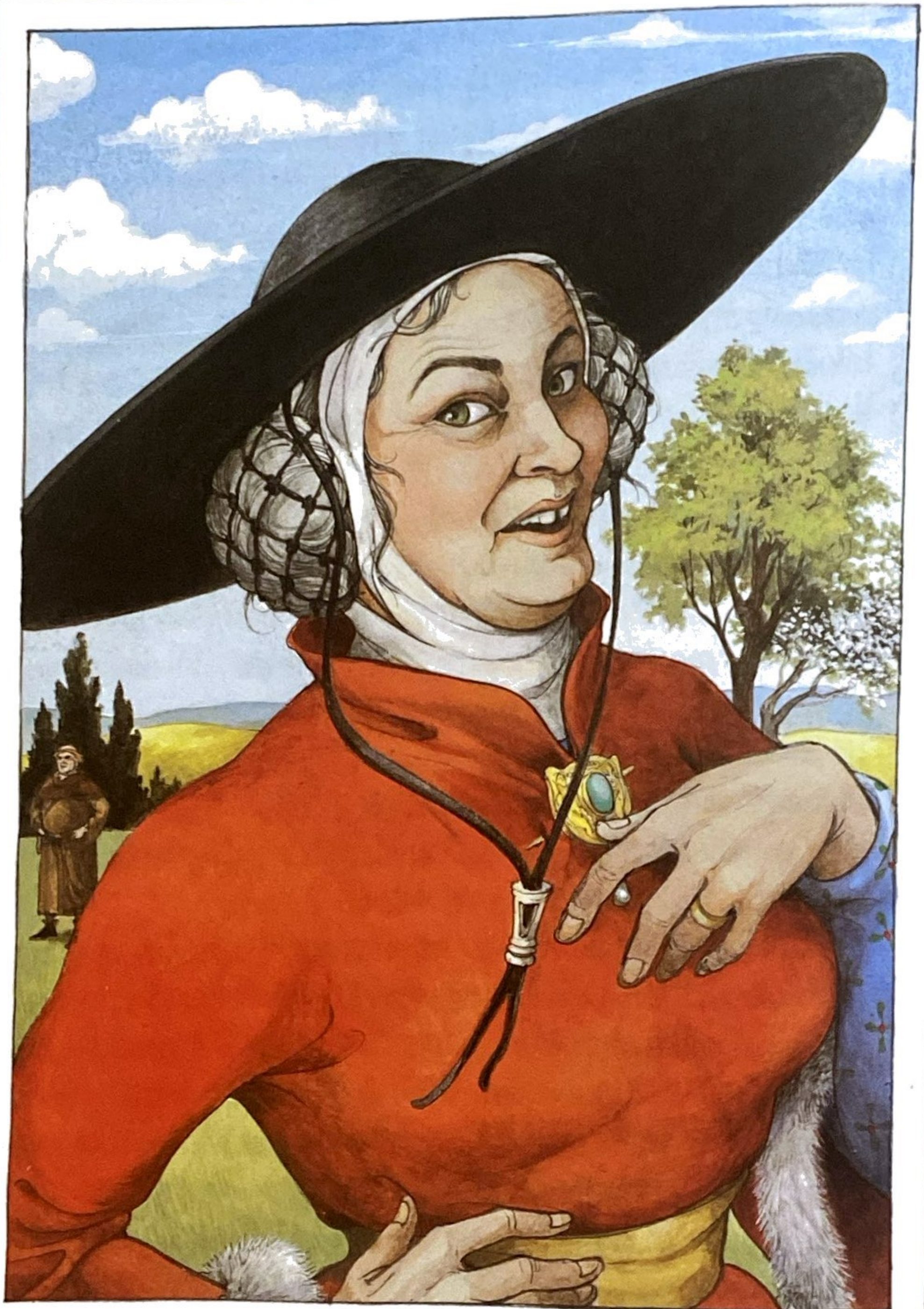
"He read to me about Samson, who lost his hair. While he was sleeping, his sweetheart cut it with her scissors. Through her treason, he lost both his eyes.

"He read to me about Hercules and Dejanira, who caused him to set himself on fire. He spoke more evil against women than a heart can imagine. He knew more sayings than there are blades of grass in this world. 'It's better to live with a lion or a stinking dragon,' he said, 'than with a scolding woman. It's better to live on top of the roof than down in the house with an angry wife who's so wicked and contrary that she hates whatever her husband loves. A beautiful woman who isn't faithful as well is like a gold ring in a pig's nose.' Who can imagine the pain and sorrow in my heart?

"When I saw he would read that cursed book all night, I suddenly ripped out three pages while he was reading and hit him so hard on the cheek with my fist that he fell down backward into our fire. He jumped up like a mad lion and hit me on the head so that I collapsed on the floor as if I were dead. When he saw how still I lay, he was frightened and would have run away if I hadn't come to at last. 'Have you killed me, false thief?' I said. 'Have you murdered me for my property? Before I die, I'll kiss you.'

"He came close to me and knelt down. 'Dear Allison,' he said, 'I'll never hit you again. You have only yourself to blame that I did it this time. Forgive me, I beg you.' I hit him on the cheek again and said, 'Thief, this much am I revenged. I'm dying; I can't talk anymore.'

"But finally, with much effort, we two made up. He gave me the rule of his house and his land, his tongue and his fist. I made him burn his book. When I'd gotten control, he said, 'My own true wife, do what you want as long as you live. Take care of your honor and my property.' After that we never had an argument. I was as kind and true to him as any wife from Denmark to India, and so was he to me. I pray to God who sits in judgment to bless his soul. And now, if you'll listen, I'll tell you a story."



The Wife Of Bath

THE WIFE OF BATH'S TALE

IN OLDEN DAYS, WHEN ARTHUR WAS KING, all Britain was filled with fairies. I speak of a time many hundreds of years ago when the elf-queen and her lively company danced in green meadows. But nowadays no one can see elves, because all over the country holy friars are thick as specks of dust in a sunbeam, blessing halls, rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, cities, towns, castles, high towers, villages, barns, stables, dairies. As a result, there are no fairies. Where elves used to roam, the friar himself wanders around his district, begging in the morning and the afternoon.

It so happened that King Arthur had in his court a young man who one day was riding by a river. He saw a maiden walking all alone. In spite of all she could do, he forced himself upon her. This oppression stirred up a lot of noise. It came to the attention of King Arthur, and the knight was condemned to death. According to the law of that time, he would have lost his head, if the queen and her ladies hadn't begged mercy for him from the king. The king turned him over to the queen to do with as she wished. It was up to her to decide whether the knight would live or die.

The queen thanked the king. One day, when the time was ripe, she said to the knight, "You're not yet sure of your life. I'll spare you if you can tell me what it is that women want most. Watch out, or you'll feel the sword on your neck. If you can't tell me right now, I'll allow you to search for a year and a day to find a satisfactory answer. Before you leave, you must promise that you'll return and give yourself up to this court."

The knight sighed with sorrow, but what could he do? He wasn't free to act as he pleased. At last he decided to go wandering, and to return at the end of the year with whatever answer God provided. He said goodbye and went on his way.

He asked the question everyplace he thought there was a chance of learning what women love most, but nowhere could he find two people agreeing together on this subject. Some said that women love riches best. Some said honor, some said fine clothes, some said pleasure, some said frequent widowhood and remarriage. Some said our hearts are easiest when we're flattered and pleased. I'll tell you honestly, that's near the truth. A man can win us best with flattery, attention, and effort. That'll catch all of us.

Some say we love best to be free to do just as we please without criticism of our faults, to be thought wise and sensible. There isn't one of us who won't kick up a fuss when rubbed the wrong way, even if it's by the truth. He who tries it will find that no matter how vicious we are inside, we want to be thought of as wise and pure.

Some say that it's our great pleasure to be considered dependable and trustworthy, and to hold steadily to a single purpose and not betray the things men tell us. But that tale isn't worth a rake handle. We women can't keep a secret.

This knight's heart was heavy when he realized that he couldn't find out what women love best. But he could stay away no longer. The day had come on which he must turn toward home. Worrying as he rode on his way, he happened to pass by the edge of a forest, where he saw more than two dozen ladies dancing. Eagerly he drew near the dance, hoping to learn something. But when he got close, the dancers vanished, he didn't know where. He didn't see a living creature except for the ugliest old woman you can imagine, sitting on the green.

The old woman stood up and said, "Sir Knight, no road goes through here. Tell me what you're looking for. Perhaps I can help. Old people know a lot."

"Dear Mother," said the knight, "I'm as good as dead unless I can tell what it is women want most. If you can tell me, I'll make it worth your while."

"Give me your hand," she said. "Promise to do the first thing I ask of you, if it's in your power, and I'll tell you what you want to know before night."

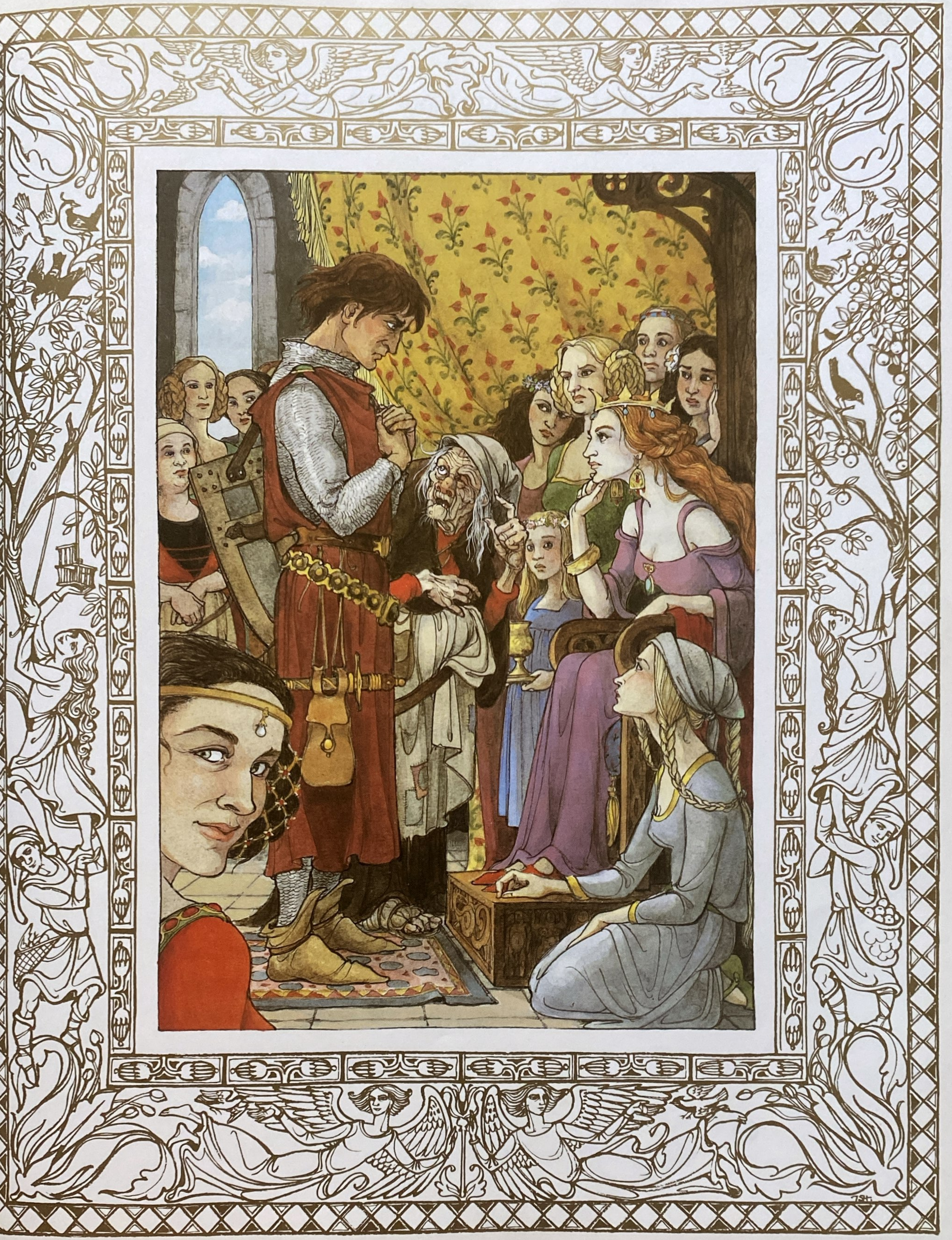
"I give you my promise," said the knight.

"Then," she said, "I can assure you your life is safe. I'd bet my own life that the queen will agree with me. The haughtiest wearer of kerchief or headdress won't dare deny what I'll teach you. Let's go on without any more talking." Then she whispered something in his ear and told him to rejoice without fear.

When they came to the court, the knight said he'd returned on the appointed day, as he had promised. He said he was ready with his answer. Many noble ladies, many maidens, many wise widows assembled to hear him, with the queen herself sitting as judge. The knight was commanded to appear. The crowd was ordered to keep quiet so that the knight could tell his listeners what thing mortal women love best.

The knight didn't stand there dumb as an ox, but answered the question in a voice loud enough for all the court to hear. "Your majesty," he said, "in general, women desire to rule over their husbands and their lovers, to be the authority above them. Though you kill me for saying it, this is what you want most. Do with me what you will; I'm here at your command."

In all the court there wasn't a wife, maid, or widow who contradicted him. They all agreed he was entitled to keep his life.



When she heard that, the old woman whom the knight had found sitting on the green jumped up. "My lady queen," she said, "before your court adjourns, do me justice. I taught the knight his answer. For this he promised to do the first thing I asked of him, if it lay within his power. Before this court I ask you, Sir Knight, to take me for your wife. You know I saved your life. If that's not true, swear it on your faith."

"Alas," answered the knight, "I know perfectly well that's what I promised. For the love of God, ask for something else. Take all my wealth, and let my body go."

"I curse us both," she said, "if I'll do that. Though I'm ugly, old, and poor, I don't want all the precious metal below or above the earth, unless I'm your wife and your lover too."

"My lover?" he said. "No, my damnation! A pity that any of my family should be so dishonored!" But it was all for nothing; in the end he was compelled to marry her.

Some might say it's negligent of me not to tell all about the festive celebration that took place that day. I'll make a short answer: there was no festive celebration, only heaviness and sorrow. He wed her in the morning, and for the rest of the day he hid like an owl, so miserable was he at having such an ugly wife.

The knight was so unhappy that when he was in bed with his wife he wept and squirmed. His old wife lay smiling. "O dear husband, bless you," she said. "Does every knight behave this way with his wife? Is this the custom of King Arthur's court? I'm your own true love and your wife. I'm the one who saved your life. I never did you any harm. Why are you acting crazy? Of what am I guilty? For the love of God, tell me, and I'll fix it."

"Fix it?" the knight said. "It'll never be fixed. You're ugly and old and so low-born that it's no wonder I toss and turn. I wish to God my heart would burst!"

"Is this the reason you're so restless?"

"Yes," he said, "and no wonder."

"Now, sir," she said, "if I want to, I could fix all this in less than three days, if you would behave properly to me. You spoke about nobility that comes from old money. Such pride isn't worth a hen. The greatest gentleman is the one who tries to do all the noble deeds he can. Our nobility comes from Christ, not from the wealth of our ancestors. Though we may claim to be noble because we've inherited all their riches, we can't inherit the virtue that made them gentlemen.

"You can take fire, carry it to the darkest house between here and Mt. Caucasus, and shut the door on it. Still it'll burn as beautiful and bright as if twenty thousand men were looking at it. The fire will naturally do what it's supposed to do until it goes out.

"From this we can see that noble behavior isn't connected to possessions; though fire is always fire, the well born don't always live nobly. A lord's son can act shamefully. Even if he's a duke or an earl, a man's really a commoner if he performs low, sinful acts.

"Read Seneca and Boethius; there you'll see that noble is as noble does. Therefore, dear husband, I conclude that although my ancestors were humble, I hope God will grant me the grace to live virtuously. I'm noble when I begin to live nobly, avoiding sin.

"You scold me for being poor. God chose to live his life in poverty. Every man and woman understands that Jesus, heaven's king, wouldn't choose an evil way of life. Juvenal says, 'A poor man can laugh at thieves.' A poor man knows God and himself. I think poverty is a pair of spectacles through which a man can recognize his true friends.

"Now, sir, you also scold me for being old. Even if books didn't say so, honorable gentlemen tell us that men should be polite to an old man and call him 'Father' out of politeness.

"Because I'm ugly and old, you don't have to worry that I'll run off with some other man. Ugliness and age are the best watchmen. Nevertheless, I'll give you what you want.

"Choose now," she said, "one of two things: to have me old and ugly until I die, a true and humble wife to you; or to have me young and beautiful, and take your chances with the people who'll fill your house because of me, or whom I may meet someplace else. Choose for yourself, whichever you want."

The knight thought and thought, and sighed and sighed. At last he replied, "My lady, my love, my dear wife, I put myself under your rule. Choose yourself whichever is the most pleasant and does us both the most honor. I don't care which it is. Whatever you want is good enough for me."

"Then have I gained control of you," she said, "since I can choose and rule as I please?"

"Yes, certainly, wife," he said. "I consider it best."

"Kiss me," she said. "We're no longer enemies. On my honor, I'll be both to you—yes, both beautiful and good. I pray to God that I may die mad if I'm not as good and true to you as ever a wife was since the world began. And if in the morning I'm not as lovely to look at as any lady, empress, or queen in the east or west, do whatever you want with my life. Lift the curtain; see how it is."

When the knight saw that she was as young and fair as she had said, he joyfully took her in his arms and kissed her a thousand times. She obeyed him in everything that might delight or please him. And so they lived until the end of their lives in perfect joy.

Jesus Christ send us agreeable, young, loving husbands, and the luck to outlive those we marry. I also pray that Jesus shorten the lives of men who won't be ruled by their wives. To mean, angry old tightwads, may God send the plague!

THE FRANKLIN'S PROLOGUE

THE SQUIRE BEGAN AN ELABORATE FAIRY TALE, BUT before he was done, the Franklin interrupted. "My word," he said, "you've done well for yourself. I admire your cleverness. Considering how young you are, you speak with a great deal of feeling. I judge that no one here will equal you in eloquence as you grow older. Good luck to you! By the Trinity, I'd rather have my son as wise as you than receive a gift of land worth twenty pounds. What's the use of property if a man isn't virtuous? I've scolded my son because he doesn't lean toward sensible behavior. He likes to gamble with dice, spending and losing all he has. He'd rather talk with a servant than spend time with a well-born person from whom he might learn good manners."

"A straw for manners!" said our Host. "By God, Franklin, you know that each of you has sworn to tell at least a tale or two."

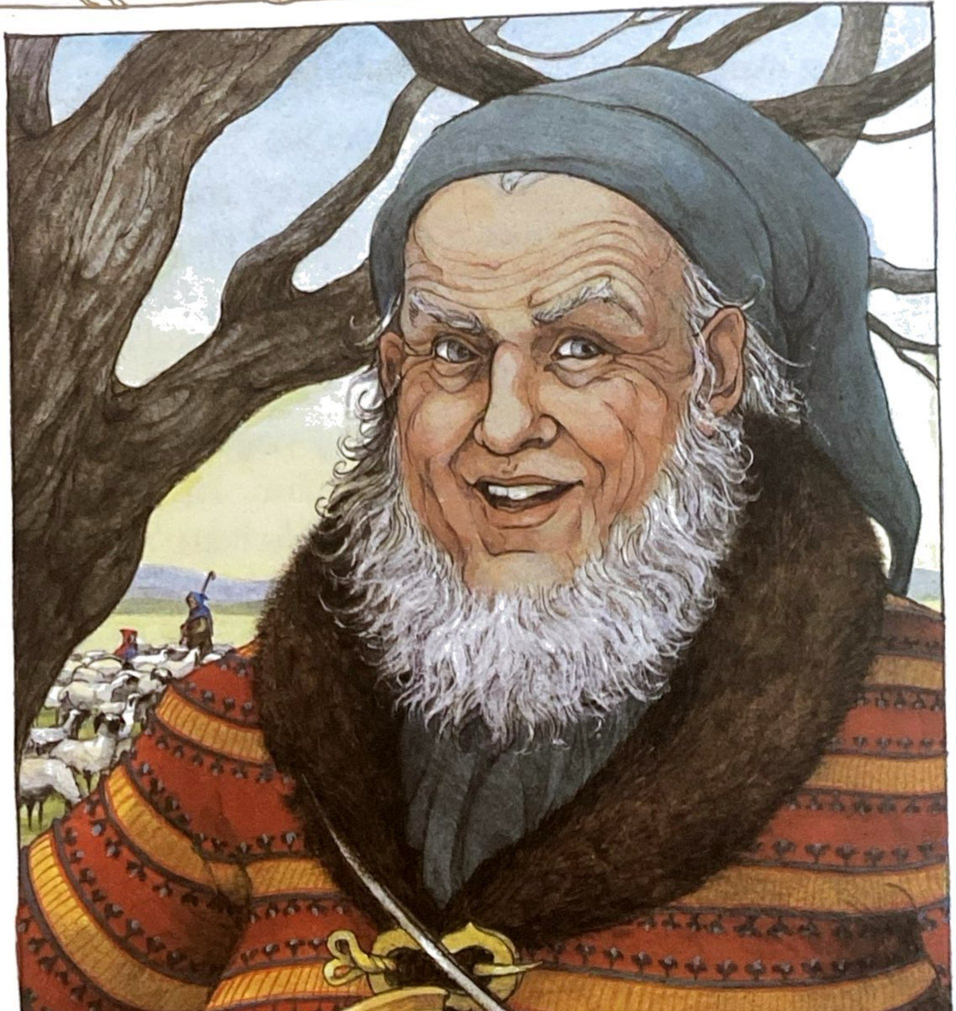
"I know that perfectly well, sir," said the Franklin. "But don't mock me because I have a word or two to say to this young man."

"Tell your tale, without any more fuss."

"I'll obey you gladly, Sir Host. I won't contradict your judgment. I pray God that what I say will please you. If it does, I'll know it's good enough."

The Franklin's beard was white as a daisy, and his complexion was ruddy. He liked bread soaked in wine for breakfast. He was in the habit of enjoying life. He was a rich man, and as hospitable as St. Julian. His bread, his ale, his wine were the best anywhere. His house was never without pies stuffed with meat and fish. That place was so full of good things to eat that it seemed to snow meat and drink. He changed his menu according to the season. He kept fat partridges in a coop and stocked his stream with bream and pike. His cook was in a lot of trouble if the sauce wasn't tasty or the carvers were unprepared. He kept his table set all day long. A dagger and a milk-white silk pouch hung from his belt. He'd been sheriff and accountant of the county. Nowhere was there a more substantial landowner.

"In Brittany," the Franklin said, "they composed poems about adventures and sang them accompanied by instruments, or else read them for pleasure. I remember one, which I'll be happy to tell you. But, gentlemen, I beg you to excuse my clumsy speech, because I'm not an educated man. I never learned literary style. Whatever I say, I must say plain. But if it pleases you, you'll hear my tale."



The Franklin

THE FRANKLIN'S TALE

IN BRITTANY THERE LIVED A KNIGHT WHO loved a lady. He did many a noble deed for her sake before he won her. She was the most beautiful woman under the sun, and of such high birth that the knight scarcely dared tell her the pain and sorrow he suffered for her love. But at last, because he was so honorable and respectful, she took pity on him and married him, permitting him to rule her as men rule their wives. To make their lives happier, he, of his own free will, swore on his honor as a knight that never in all his life would he dominate her against her will or show her jealousy. He would obey her and follow her in everything, as a lover should his lady. He would appear to retain control only for the sake of his rank.

Humbly she thanked him. "Sir," she said, "so generous is it of you to offer me so much freedom that neither God nor I will ever be guilty of allowing conflict, war, or strife to come between us. Here is my promise: I will be your true wife until I die." So they were both satisfied.

One thing, gentlemen, I can safely say. Friends must obey each other if they want to stay together for a long time. Love can't be restrained by domination. When one person tries to rule the other, love flies out the window. Love is as free as a spirit. Women naturally want liberty. They don't want to be tied down like slaves, and neither, to tell the truth, do men.

The one who is most patient in love has the advantage. Scholars tell us patience is a great virtue because it conquers when strictness fails. One shouldn't complain about every little thing. Learn forbearance, or else, I assure you, you'll learn it whether you want to or not. There's no one in the world who doesn't upon occasion say or do something wrong. Anger, illness, the stars, wine, sorrow, or a changing disposition can cause mistakes in deed or speech. One can't take revenge for each little error. Everyone with any self-control learns to restrain himself according to the situation. Therefore this wise and worthy knight promised tolerance so that he and his wife might live comfortably together. She, for her part, swore that he would never find any fault with her.

Here we can see a sensible agreement: she acquired a servant and a master—a servant in love, a master in marriage. He was both master and servant, but mostly master, since he had his beloved for his wife. And when his happiness was assured, he took his wife home to his own country, where he lived in delight and comfort.

Only he who has been happily married can know the joy and prosperity that can exist between a husband and wife. This delightful life lasted for more than a year, until the knight, whose name was Arveragus, decided to spend a year or two in England earning praise and honor in battle. The book I read says he lived there two years.

Now I shall leave Arveragus and speak of Dorigen, his wife. She sighed and wept over his absence, as noblewomen do if they feel like it. She mourned, wailed, fasted, and lamented. She missed him so much that she counted the rest of the world as nothing.

Her friends tried day and night to comfort her. They lectured her, saying she was killing herself for no reason. They made every effort to lighten her spirits. As everyone knows, if you chip away at a stone long enough, eventually you'll carve an image. They comforted her so long that finally her great sorrow lessened. She couldn't have survived forever in such violent grief. Besides, Arveragus sent home letters saying he was well and would soon return. Otherwise, her sorrow would have killed her.

Her friends saw her sadness ease a little, and begged her on their knees to drive away her dark thoughts by coming out with them. Realizing that it was for the best, she finally agreed.

Her castle stood next to the sea, and for amusement she often walked with her friends on a cliff from which she could see many ships and barges sailing on their way. But the sight became part of her sorrow. "Among so many ships," she often said, "is there not one that will bring my lord home? Then my heart would be cured of this bitter agony."

Other times she'd sit on the edge of the cliff, thinking. But when she looked down at the frightening black rocks, her heart would shiver so from fear that she could hardly stand up. She'd seat herself on the grass and, looking piteously into the sea, she would sigh, "Eternal God, who rules the world with justice and order, men say you make nothing without a reason. But, Lord, these fiendish rocks seem to be the work of chaos, rather than the creation of a perfect, wise, unchanging God. What's their use? South, north, west, east, they feed no bird, beast, or man. These rocks have slain a hundred thousand bodies. When you created men in your own image, you seemed to love them very much, so how can it be that you have made these destructive things that do men no good, only harm? God who made the wind blow, protect my lord! I wish you would sink all these black rocks in Hell for his sake."

Her friends saw that it was not a pleasure but a pain for her to walk by the sea. They looked for entertainment elsewhere. They led her by rivers, wells, and other delightful places. They danced and played chess and backgammon.

One morning they took her to a nearby garden, where they had prepared food and drink. It was the sixth of May. The gentle showers of spring had painted the garden full of leaves and flowers, while skillful hands had arranged it all so artfully that it seemed like Paradise. The smell and sight of the flowers would have lightened the heart of any person ever born, except one distressed by too much sickness and sorrow. After dinner everyone danced and sang—except Dorigen. She wept because among the dancers she couldn't see the one man who was both her husband and her love. But she had to stay there a while, hoping that her sorrow would lessen.

Dancing with the others was a lively squire, all dressed up like the garden in May. He sang and danced better than any man since the world began. He was strong, virtuous, rich, intelligent, and loved by everyone. Unknown to Dorigen, this gallant squire Aurelius, servant of Venus, had for two years or more loved her better than any other creature. He had never dared tell her of his grief. His love was hopeless; he could express it a little, in a general way, in poems and songs that spoke of a sorrow which tormented him like a fury in Hell. He must die, he said, like Echo, who dared not speak of her love for Narcissus. He couldn't betray his feelings in any other way, except that now and then while dancing he might look in her face like a man asking a favor, but she didn't know what he meant. Nevertheless—because he was her neighbor, and a respectable man whom she had known for a long time—before the party broke up, they spoke to each other.

When he saw his chance, Aurelius said, "Madam, by God who made this world, I wish that the day your Arveragus went overseas, I had gone to a place from which I would never come back. I know my worship of you is hopeless. My reward is only a broken heart. Madam, have pity on my great pain. With a word you can slay or save me. I wish to God I were buried at your feet. I have no time to say more. Have mercy, beloved, or you will kill me."

"Do you really mean this?" she said. "I had no idea. But Aurelius, now that I'm aware of your intentions, I tell you, by God who gave me soul and life, I will never be untrue to my husband in word or deed. That is my final answer." But then, as a joke, she added, "Aurelius, since I see you lament so pitifully, I will be your love whenever you remove from the coast of Brittany, stone by stone, all the rocks that prevent ships from passing. When you've made the coast so clean of rocks that not a single pebble can be seen, I promise that in every way I will love you best of all men."

"Can you not be more merciful than that?" he said.

"No, by the Lord that made me," she said. "I know very well it'll never happen. Put such foolish ideas out of your mind. What pleasure is it for a man to love another man's wife?"

Aurelius sighed and answered, "Madam, I must die a sudden, horrible death." With those words, he turned away.

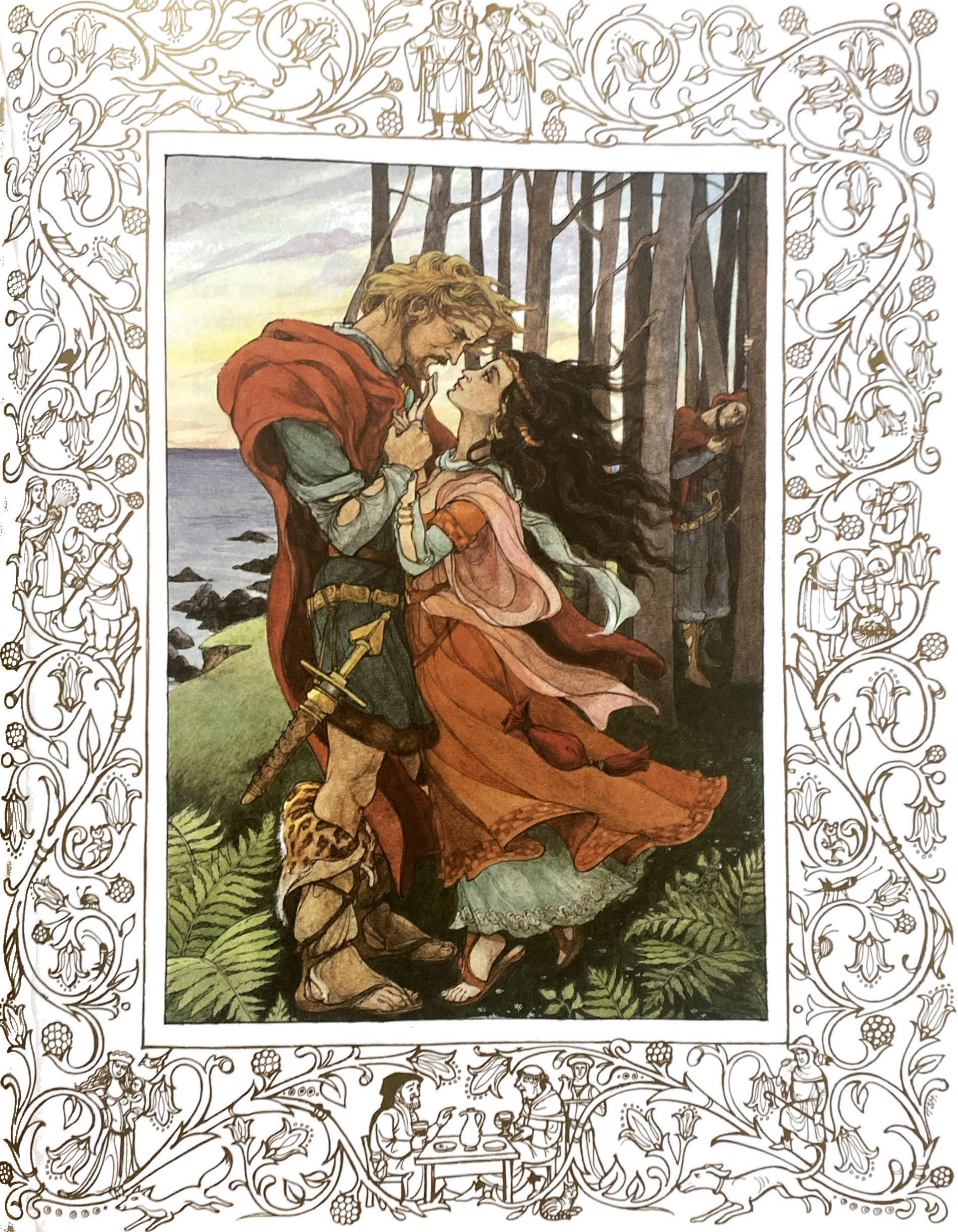
Knowing nothing of this conversation, their friends wandered up and down the garden paths, enjoying themselves all over again, until the sun paled and the horizon robbed it of its light. That is to say, it was night. They all went happily home, except Aurelius. He returned to his house with a heavy heart, sure that he couldn't escape death. He felt his heart turn cold. He held his hands up to heaven, fell down on his knees, and said his prayers. He was out of his head with sorrow and didn't know what he was saying.

He prayed first to the sun. "Apollo," he said, "god and ruler of every plant, herb, tree, and flower, cast your merciful eye on wretched, forlorn Aurelius. Lord, though I am innocent, my lady has sworn my death. In your graciousness, have some pity upon my dying heart. Except for my lady, I know that you, if you want to, can help me best. Your blessed sister Diana is queen of the sea. She is brought to life by your fire, and so she follows you; just so, the sea wishes naturally to follow her. Therefore, Lord Apollo, this is my request: Make a miracle, or my heart will break. Beg Diana to bring a tide that will rise at least five fathoms above the highest rock in Brittany, and let this tide last two years. Then I can say to my lady, 'Keep your promise; the rocks have disappeared.' Lord Apollo, do this miracle for me, or else beg your sister to sink every rock under the ground to the dark region where Pluto lives—or I will never win my lady." With these words he fainted, and he lay in a trance for a long time.

His brother, who knew of his sorrow, carried him to bed. I'll leave this tormented creature lying there. It doesn't matter to me whether he lives or dies.

Arveragus, the flower of chivalry, had come home with all his worthy men, in good health and with great honor. Dorigen was in heaven now that she held in her arms her gallant husband, this bold knight who loved her better than life. It never occurred to him that any man had spoken to her of love while he was away. He didn't think about such things, but danced, jousted, and made her happy. I leave them living in joy and contentment to return to sick Aurelius.

Wretched Aurelius lay in torment for more than two years without setting foot out of bed. His only comfort all this time was his brother, a scholar, who knew about his trouble. The scholar dared say nothing about this matter to anyone else, but carried it secretly in his heart. He wept privately until at last he remembered that when he was studying at Orléans, in France, he saw a book about magic that a fellow student who was supposed to be reading law had hidden in his desk. This book spoke much of foolish things that in our time aren't worth a fly, because the faith of the holy church in our creed allows no such illusion to harm us.



When he remembered this book, his heart danced with joy, and he said to himself, "My brother will be cured soon, because I'm sure there are tricks these magicians can use to create apparitions. I've heard that at feasts they've made water and a boat appear and then rowed up and down the hall. Sometimes a fierce lion seems to materialize; sometimes flowers spring up as in a meadow; sometimes a vine with red and white grapes; sometimes a castle of mortar and stone. Then, when they want to, the magicians make it all disappear again. If I could find some old friend at Orléans who knows magic, perhaps he could arrange for my brother to win his love. These scholars might be able to make it seem to human eyes that all the black rocks of Brittany have disappeared, and ships can come right up to the beach. They might be able to make this illusion last a week or two. Then my brother would be cured of his grief, and she would have to keep her promise or be shamed."

To make a long story short, the scholar came to his brother's bed. The squire was so comforted that he jumped up and started for Orléans immediately.

When they came close to the city, they met a young scholar roaming about by himself. He greeted them politely in Latin, and then he said a wonderful thing: "I know why you came here." Before they took another step, he told them what they had in mind.

The scholar from Brittany asked about friends he'd known in the old days. He wept when he heard they were all dead.

Aurelius dismounted from his horse and went home with the magician, who entertained him royally. Aurelius had never seen such a house.

Before they went to supper, the magician showed him forests full of wild deer with the longest horns ever seen by human eyes. He saw a hundred slain by hounds or bleeding from bitter wounds inflicted by arrows. When these wild deer disappeared, he saw falconers who'd killed a river heron with their hawks. He saw knights jousting in a field. After this, as a great favor, the magician showed Aurelius himself dancing with his lady. And when the master who had created this magic saw it was getting late, he clapped his hands, and goodbye! The whole performance disappeared. They never stepped out of the house while looking at these marvelous sights, but sat alone and quiet in the magician's study, among all his books.

The master called his servant and said, "Is our supper ready? It's almost an hour since I went into the study with this gentleman and told you to prepare it."

"Sir," said the servant, "it's ready whenever you want it, even if you want it right now."

"It's best that we eat then," he said. "Even these lovers have to relax sometime."

After supper they talked about the magician's fee for removing all the rocks in Brittany. He drove a hard bargain. He swore he wouldn't take less than a thousand pounds and said he wasn't too willing to do it even for that amount.

Aurelius said, "What's a thousand pounds? If I were lord of the world, I'd give it all to you. We are agreed; the bargain is struck. I give my word; you shall be paid. But let's not, out of laziness, stay here more than another day."

"No," said the scholar. "I promise."

Aurelius went to bed and slept well. His hope of happiness eased the pain in his sad heart.

In the morning Aurelius and the magician traveled to Brittany, where they remained. The books remind me that this took place in the cold, frosty month of December. The sun was old and pale. The bitter frost, sleet, and rain had destroyed the greenery in every garden. Old Janus, the two-faced god, sat by the fire and drank wine from a great ox horn. The meat of a roasted boar stood before him, and every cheerful soul cried, "Noel."

Aurelius did everything he could to make the sorcerer feel welcome. He begged the magician to work hard to end his pain, or he would slit his own heart with a sword. The magician pitied the man so much that he watched night and day for the right time to cast the spell that would make Dorigen, and every other person, say the rocks of Brittany had gone away or sunk underground. At last the moment came for his tricks and skulduggery. He knew all the rituals and evil practices used in those pagan days. He waited no longer. Because of his magic, for a week or two it seemed as if all the rocks had disappeared.

Aurelius, still desperate about whether or not he would win his love, had waited day and night for this miracle. When he realized that every one of the rocks was gone, and there was no further obstacle in his way, he fell down at the sorcerer's feet and said, "I thank you, lord, and you, my lady Venus, who have helped me out of my troubles." He went to the temple where he knew he would encounter his lady.

When he saw his moment, he greeted his beloved humbly, with a trembling heart. "My own true lady," he said, "whom I fear and love, the last thing in the world I want to do is upset you. But I am so ill from love of you that I will die right here at your feet, though I am innocent. But even if you feel no pity at my death, think carefully before you go back on your word. Madam, you know very well what you vowed—not that I claim anything of you except your mercy, but in a nearby garden, you know what you promised me. You took my hand and swore to love me best—God knows you said it, even though I am not worthy. Madam, right now I am thinking more of your honor than I am of my own life. I have done as you commanded. If you wish, you can go look. Do as you like. You will find me alive or dead in that garden. Remember your promise. It is in your power whether I live or die, but I know the rocks have disappeared."

He went away, and she stood like a stone, not a drop of blood in her face. She had never thought she would be caught in such a trap. "Alas," she said, "that this should happen! I never imagined the possibility of such a monstrous marvel. It's against nature." Home she went, a broken creature, so afraid she was scarcely able to walk. It was pitiful to see her weeping, wailing, and fainting for two whole days. She didn't tell anyone what had happened, for Arveragus was out of town. With pale face and sorrowful expression, she complained only to herself. "I curse Fortune," she said, "who unaware has wrapped me in a chain I can escape only through death or dishonor. I must choose one or the other. I would rather lose my life than know myself to be false or my name besmirched. With my death I am free. Many noble wives and many maidens throughout history have killed themselves rather than sin with their bodies."

Dorigen thought about Phidon's daughters, the Lacedaemonian maidens, Stymphalis, Hasdrubal's wife, Lucretia, the seven maidens of Miletus, Abradates' wife, the daughters of Demotion and Scedasus, the Theban maidens, Nicerates' wife, Alcibiades' mistress, Alcestis, Penelope, Laodamia, Portia, Artemisia, Queen Teuta, Bilia, Rhodogune, and Valeria. For two days she lamented, planning to die.

At last, upon the third night, the noble knight Arveragus came home and asked her why she was weeping so miserably. She began to weep even more. "A pity," she said, "that I was ever born! This I have said; this I have sworn"—and she told him all that you've heard. I don't have to tell it to you again.

In a cheerful, friendly way, her husband said, "Is there anything else, Dorigen?"

"No, no," she said. "God help me. This is too much, even if it is God's will."

"Wife," he said, "let sleeping dogs lie. Perhaps it may yet be well. You shall keep your word, by my faith. God have mercy on me, I would rather be stabbed for the love I have for you than see you fail to keep your oath. A promise must be kept"—but as he said that, he burst into tears. "I forbid you," he said, "on pain of death, to tell anyone what's happened. As best I can, I'll bear my sorrow. I won't walk around with a long face so that people suspect or judge you."

He called a squire and a maidservant. "Go with Dorigen," he said, "and bring her wherever she says." They left, but didn't know why. He didn't tell anyone the reason.

You may think him a wicked man to place his wife in danger. Listen to the story before you weep for her. She may have better luck than you think. After you've heard the tale, you can pass judgment.

That squire Aurelius who was so passionate about Dorigen happened to meet her on the busiest street in the middle of town as she was on her way to the garden, as she had promised. He was on his way to the garden too, because he spied on all her movements and knew when she left her house. Whether they met by chance or God's purpose, he greeted her gladly and asked her where she was going. She answered, half out of her mind, "To the garden to keep my promise, as my husband ordered."

Aurelius considered the situation. He felt great pity in his heart for her and her misery, and for Arveragus, the chivalrous knight who was so unwilling for her to break her word that he had told her to do as she had promised. His heart was touched. He decided it was better all around to remain unsatisfied than to act against the rules of courtly behavior. Briefly he said, "Madam, tell this to Lord Arveragus: I see his great kindness to you, and also I know your misery. In his compassion he would rather be shamed than have you break your promise to me. I would prefer to suffer forever than come between the two of you. Madam, I release you from your promise. I return into your hand every vow you made me since you were born. I swear I will never reproach you about any promise. I take my leave of the best and truest wife I ever knew."

Let every wife remember Dorigen and be careful what she swears! Now you see that a squire can be as generous as a knight.

She thanked him on her bare knees, and, rushing home to her huband, told him all you heard me say. Why should

I make this story longer? It's enough to say he was well satisfied, you can be sure.

Arveragus and his wife Dorigen lived happily together for the rest of their lives. Never again was there any anger between them. He cherished her as though she were a queen, and she was true to him forever. You won't get anything more out of me about these two.

Having lost all his money, Aurelius cursed the day he was born. "What a pity," he said, "that I promised that philosopher a thousand pounds of pure gold. What shall I do? I see that I'm doomed. I'll have to sell my property and become a beggar. I can't stay here, shaming all my relatives, unless the magician shows me some mercy. Perhaps I can offer to pay him off in installments. If he'll allow that, I'll thank him for his kindness and keep my promise."

With a heavy heart he went to his strongbox and took out five hundred pounds of gold, which he brought to the philosopher, begging him for time to pay the remainder. "Master," he said, "I can boast that I've never failed to keep my word. I'll repay my debt to you, even if it means I must go begging in nothing but my undershirt. But I must ask you to accept my security and give me two or three years to pay off the rest, or else I'll have to sell my inheritance. There's nothing more to say."

When he heard those words, the philosopher answered sternly, "Didn't I keep my end of the bargain?"

"Certainly, well and truly."

"Didn't you get the woman you wanted?"

"No, no," the squire said, sighing.

"Why? Tell me if you can."

Aurelius told him all you heard before. It's not necessary to repeat it. He said, "Generous Arveragus would rather die in sorrow and distress than allow his wife to go back on her word." He told him about Dorigen's sorrow too, and how she would rather die than prove an unfaithful wife; and said she had given her promise in ignorance, never having heard what magic could do. "I felt so sorry for her that as freely as he sent her to me, I sent her back to him again. That's the sum total; there is no more."

The philosopher replied, "Dear brother, you all behaved generously to one another. You're a squire, he's a knight. God forbid that a scholar can't be as generous as either of you. Sir, I release you from your debt of a thousand pounds as if you'd just this moment crept out of a hole in the ground, never having seen me before. I won't take a penny from you for all my skill and effort. You paid my living expenses. It was enough. Farewell, and good day!" The scholar mounted his horse and went on his way.

Gentlemen, this is the question I would ask you: Who do you think was the most generous? Tell me, before we go any farther. I know no more; my story is done.

The Lyf so short the craft so long to lerne

BARBARA COHEN is the author of numerous books for young people, including picture book texts, novels, and retellings of folktales and biblical stories. She has received awards for her work, and several of her books have been named ALA Notable Books. A graduate of Barnard College, Ms. Cohen received an M.A. degree from Rutgers University and taught English for several years before becoming a full-time writer. "Other than Shakespeare," she says, "no writer in English was Chaucer's equal."

TRINA SCHART HYMAN has illustrated many distinguished children's books, including the 1985 Caldecott Medal winner, *St. George and the Dragon*. She acknowledges that she had been waiting for twenty years for someone to let her illustrate *The Canterbury Tales*. In preparation for the work, Ms. Hyman visited and sketched the countryside around Canterbury, through which Chaucer's pilgrims would have passed.

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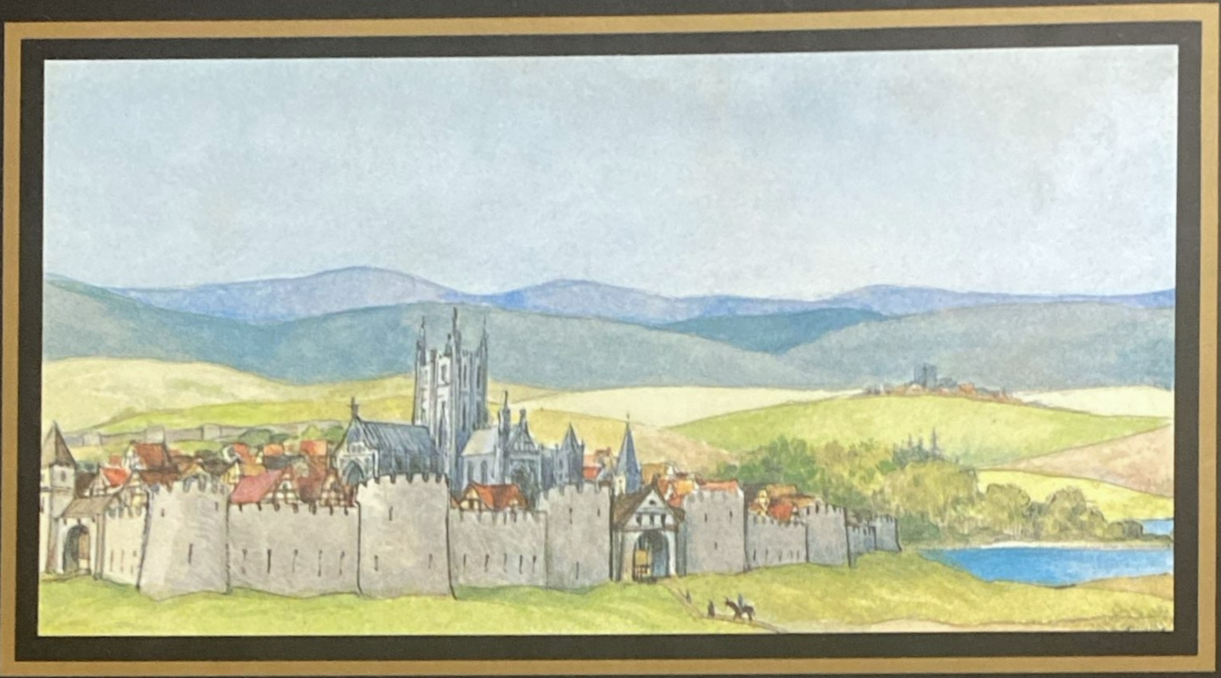

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